



Progressivism's Aesthetic Education: The Bildungsroman and the Struggle for the American School, 1890-1920

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Progressivism's Aesthetic Education:
The *Bildungsroman* and the Struggle for the American School, 1890-1920

A dissertation presented
by
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to
The Department of English

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in the subject of
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Progressivism's Aesthetic Education:
The *Bildungsroman* and the Struggle for the American School, 1890-1920

During the Progressive Era, literary writers such as Abraham Cahan, Willa Cather, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman engaged with ideas emerging from the newly consolidated educational profession about art's capacity to mediate between individual and social development. These ideas varied widely in their philosophical, pedagogical, and political implications, but all reinforced the authority of professional educators at the expense of democratically elected boards of education. Novels working through these ideas can be usefully theorized as *Bildungsromane* if the definition of the *Bildungsroman* is refined to be more sensitive to the wide range of educational philosophies that can inform it, and to the range of attitudes, from critical to worshipful, that it can assume toward these philosophies. This reimagining of the genre opens up the possibility that the *Bildungsroman*, and the *Bildung* idea more broadly, can have a more positive political valence than most scholars have acknowledged. In particular, a viable project of aesthetic education can be discerned in the philosophy of John Dewey, although it lacks a clear literary corollary.

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for Clara

Introduction: Aesthetic Education and Social Action

Overview

At the center of this study are three authors, Abraham Cahan, Willa Cather, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose sense of artistic vocation was shaped by and against the rise of a massive new cultural edifice: the American educational profession. In order to understand what the professionalization of education meant to them, we will draw on three related, but seldom actually juxtaposed, scholarly discourses, each of which will hopefully be enlarged by the encounter. First, we will turn to *Bildungsroman* criticism for a sophisticated account of how the category of the aesthetic can manage (or mask) the conflict between democracy and a self-authorizing educational apparatus; in so doing we will see how *Bildungsroman* criticism, which has been very profitably applied to literatures of Europe and the Global South, might begin to attend to American literature. Second, we will look to the history of American education for a description of the political, institutional, and philosophical dimensions of educational professionalization; to these we will add an account of leading educators' largely overlooked statements about the arts and their centrality to democratic schooling. Third, we will situate the literary writers and the educators within a broader intellectual history of the American Progressive Era organized around the ideal of social action; this will enable us to better recognize American progressivism as a literary-historical phenomenon, and to talk about a literature of progressivism. Through these interlocking frames, we can see Cahan, Cather, and Gilman as both promoters and critics of three distinctive, and institutionally powerful, visions of aesthetic education for social action, which leave both formal and thematic traces throughout their work. Cahan is engaged with the early progressive education movement known as Herbartianism, Cather with Montessori education, and Gilman with the movement for education based on "social efficiency."

Although the bulk of this study is descriptive, it also has a normative dimension that should be acknowledged from the outset. Just as the German Idealist concept of *Bildung*, especially as articulated by Friedrich Schiller, is distorted by its reliance on a concept of pure reason, so the three varieties of progressivism's aesthetic education just mentioned are compromised by overly rigid conceptions of a "science of education." The idea that democratic education, the induction of free individuals into a free society, could be placed on an objective scientific footing held enormous appeal for the champions of educational professionalization. Without denying that scientific methods can be usefully applied to educational questions up to a point, the argument that educational questions can ultimately be *reduced* to scientific ones cannot be seriously entertained from the standpoint of either pragmatism or poststructuralism, two perspectives that seem to encompass almost all thinking in humanities departments today. If both the rationalist aesthetic education of German Idealism and the scientific aesthetic education of American progressivism break up on the rocks of contemporary critical consensus, must we conclude that there is no version of the ideal of *Bildung* or aesthetic education with which the professional humanities might identify?

It would be hasty to venture a definitive answer to this question. Although I ultimately answer it in the negative, I hope to present the evidence in a manner that will be useful for those who would answer it in the affirmative. The following three chapters will reconstruct three different variants of *Bildung* based in a science of education, each of which might, despite its shortcomings, be suggestive for some readers. The final chapter presents a fourth version of Progressive Era aesthetic education, found in the philosophy of John Dewey, which represents, it seems to me, the most plausible form that the Progressive Era *Bildung* ideal can take. In Dewey we find a fully articulated reconstruction of the *Bildung* idea that makes the cultivation of individual freedom and self-realization, of democratic solidarity and social action, and of aesthetic perceptiveness and sensitivity all mutually necessary, and all ultimately facets of one larger project of democratic education. The educational profession that

Dewey sees as proper to this project is, *pace* many of his Progressive Era contemporaries, one founded on firsthand knowledge of the qualitative dimensions of educational experience and only secondarily concerned with the development of a science of education.

To say that Dewey's is the most plausible form that the project of aesthetic education can take does not mean that the project itself necessarily remains plausible. The Dewey who produces this idea of aesthetic education is the more metaphysically grounded Dewey described by scholars such as Robert Westbrook, Richard Bernstein, and James T. Kloppenberg, rather than the poststructuralist Dewey favored by Richard Rorty. This more ambitious Dewey, more of a system-builder both philosophically and institutionally, invites at least three important objections, each of which paints him as something of a conformist. First, in the area of institutional education, he is charged with complicity with the corporate state (by education scholars such as Clarence Karier, Michael Katz, and Paul Violas), or even with turning education into a kind of repressive state religion (by Charles Glenn, another education scholar). Second, poststructuralist pragmatists such as Rorty or Stanley Fish would question the validity of the connections among metaphysics (or even epistemology), aesthetics, and politics that this idea of aesthetic education asserts. Third, the idea that aesthetic experience is communicable among different people and thus capable of grounding a community would draw fire (for various reasons) from those, such as Richard Poirier and Stanley Cavell, who emphasize the privacy and idiosyncrasy of the complete and intense experiences of the kind that Dewey calls "consummatory." I believe that these objections can be answered, but to give them the attention they deserve would require another book. Some of these objections will be briefly addressed at the end of this Introduction. Ultimately I do not find them disqualifying, and I believe that Dewey's version of aesthetic education is viable.¹

1. Westbrook, John. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991; Bernstein, Richard J. *The Pragmatic Turn*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2013; Kloppenberg, James T. *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986; Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989; Karier, Clarence J., Paul C. Violas, and Joel H.

Even if one is not convinced that Dewey's ideas about aesthetic education are worth acting on, however, they are worth understanding, especially in today's educational landscape. Humanities educators at all levels face the prospect of deprofessionalization, whether from the disappearance of the tenure track in postsecondary education, or, in primary and secondary education, the replacement of traditional public schooling by charters and vouchers and the decreasing autonomy of teachers even within traditional public schools. In light of these developments, it seems a good time to revisit the founding justifications for educational professionalism, in order to shore it up as we know it, or to reinvent it, or even, perhaps, to abandon it. All of the authors and movements examined here can contribute to this process of rethinking. Dewey will provide our ultimate philosophical frame of reference. The literary writers, meanwhile, will extend our sense of what different visions of educational professionalism mean as aesthetic commitments, making them objects of literary as well as philosophical and sociological criticism.

The *Bildungsroman* and the *Bildung* Ideal

Bildungsromane often tell of their young protagonists' formal education, and also of the development they undergo without supervision. It is the type of novel in which we would expect to find depictions of schooling, and of the limits of schooling. This idea of the *Bildungsroman* as the "coming-of-age novel," however, will not be our focus here. The *Bildungsroman* (a notoriously prickly term for translators) can also mean the "novel of *Bildung*," of a special kind of quest for cultivation which, while historically

Spring, eds., *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Rand McNally, 1972; Karier, Clarence J. *The Individual, Society, and Education: A History of American Educational Ideas*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986; Karier, Clarence J. *Shaping the American Educational State: 1900 to the Present*. New York: Free Press, 1975; Glenn, Charles Leslie. *The American Model of State and School: An Historical Inquiry*. New York: Continuum, 2012; Fish, Stanley. "Afterword: Truth and Toilets: Pragmatism and the Practices of Life." *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*. Ed. Morris Dickstein. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998, pp. 418-436; Poirier, Richard. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. New York: Random House, 1987; Cavell, Stanley. "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?" *Revival of Pragmatism*, pp. 72-82; Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee, 2005 (1934).

associated with German Idealism, has increasingly been recognized elsewhere as well. Our focus will be on a special kind of institution, which inevitably figures in this quest for cultivation, and which is typified by the Tower Society of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. As we draw on the work of *Bildungsroman* scholars such as Franco Moretti, Pheng Cheah, Marc Redfield, and Joseph Slaughter, it becomes possible to generalize the Tower Society beyond *Wilhelm Meister*, and to see it as a category of institution that emerges when certain philosophical commitments intersect with certain social conditions.²

These commitments and conditions can be stated baldly. On the philosophical side, we find (in characters, authors, or cultures, depending on the scope of our inquiry) a commitment to social stability rather than revolutionary upheaval, but also to the democratic freedom of each individual to make of herself what she will. Rather than accepting that these goods are incommensurable, their eventual reconciliation is posited as a destiny inherent in human nature, and society is thought to be safe from anarchic or revolutionary violence only once this true human nature comes into its own. Democracy's success thus comes to depend on a distinction between human nature as it theoretically could be, flowering forth in a perfect harmony of individuals and society, and as it is actually observed in everyday life. Finally, aesthetic experience is posited as a type of pure human experience that is held to both foreshadow and help bring about this perfect harmony. On the social side, meanwhile, we find an expansion of democracy to new populations or spheres of life which precipitates conflicts that endanger vested interests, in response to which anxious elites deploy cultural rather than nakedly political power. Unlike most kinds of propaganda, however, this cultural response must be, because of the elites' own

2. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von, and Thomas Carlyle. *Wilhelm Meister*. London & Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930; Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987; Pheng Cheah. *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003; Redfield, Marc. *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996; Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Trans. Reginald Snell. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004; Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.

philosophical commitments, of a kind that really seems to enhance rather than suppress the self-determination that democracy has promised to each individual; absorbing this new culture must feel like a process of self-discovery, not like a catechism imposed from without. The institutional home of this special kind of cultural project, in which many of its participants will sincerely believe but which is also effectively a servant of vested interests, is the kind of organization that we will call a Tower Society.

Moretti sees Darcy's estate in *Pride and Prejudice* as one kind of Tower Society, and Slaughter sees international "development" NGOs as another. One argument of this study is that during the Progressive Era, the American public school system began to resemble, in the minds of some of its promoters at least, a Tower Society. I do not mean that they were thinking explicitly of Goethe or the German Idealist concept of *Bildung*, although some of them were, and although there are through-lines connecting the Kant/Schiller/Goethe cluster to be examined below to both American philosophy (including Dewey's undergraduate mentor James Marsh) and, via the influential example of the Prussian school system, to the American educational profession itself. The connection I want to draw is structural rather than historical, and its purpose is to open a line of communication between, on the one hand, *Bildungsroman* theory, with its powerful account of the role of "aesthetic ideology" in both facilitating and policing the expansion of democracy, and, on the other hand, American literary and educational history. What follows is a somewhat detailed account of the intricately interrelated psychological, social, and aesthetic elements of the classic idea of *Bildung*, all of which will reappear with significant modifications in the thinking of the founding members of the American educational profession. Schiller's idea of *Bildung*, on which the rest of this section will focus, has been thoroughly and often brilliantly analyzed by critics, while the aesthetic ideologies of the American educational profession, to which it is so structurally similar, are largely uncharted territory. The better-understood

case will, hopefully, help us orient ourselves in the less-understood cases to follow.³

Although *Bildung* is an important concept for many German Idealist thinkers, including Fichte and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, along with the writings of Immanuel Kant from which Schiller derives his vocabulary, generally serve as the conceptual nuclei of studies that define the *Bildungsroman* as the novelistic expression of particular ideas about human and social development. Schiller's letters are his attempt to explain how Enlightenment democratic principles could still be valid despite the failure of the French Revolution. The devolution of the Revolution into the Terror, which Schiller had observed by 1795 but Kant had not in 1790, was their immediate political context. Schiller thought that the Revolution had failed because it was premature. "Men have awoken from their long lethargy and self-deception, and by an impressive majority they are demanding the restitution of their inalienable rights," he observed. But, while the collapse of the *ancien regime* seemed to suggest "a physical possibility of setting Law upon the throne [. . .] and making true freedom the basis of political association," this was really a "vain hope" because "the moral possibility is wanting." Instead of the "organic life" that might have been emancipated by the dissolution of the French monarchy, he writes, "we find crude, lawless impulses which have been unleashed by the loosening of the bonds of civil order". By attaining a negative, legal freedom before they had achieved the inner moral freedom to act wisely, the French people had merely unleashed "barbarity" upon Europe. Inner moral freedom would have to precede political freedom.⁴

Schiller's conviction that the steps to human betterment must be taken in a certain order helps explain why he emphasizes the teleological narrative buried within the circularly "rotating logic of the Kantian system" of faculties. For Kant, at any given moment one faculty temporarily rules over the others, depending on whether they are being employed speculatively, morally, or aesthetically (the

3. For Marsh's views, see chapters 1 and 2 of Rockefeller, Steven. *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

4. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 34-35.

domains of the understanding, reason, and the imagination respectively). However, these three moments are not quite on an equal footing. In speculation and moral reasoning, the understanding and reason respectively legislate for the other faculties, but in aesthetic judgment, the imagination does not legislate but “engenders a free play of the faculties which testifies to the good health of the system.” When perceiving beauty, the imagination removes the narrowminded understanding from the judgments about utility that usually concern it, including any judgments about the idiosyncratic “agreeableness” of an object. The imagination does this because pure judgments of taste must claim universality – the subject must act as if “all other judging subjects ought to agree with the judgment.” Nonetheless the understanding must participate in the judgment, because only through its taxonomies, for example of light as the colors red or blue or sounds as the musical notes A or B, can the imagination grasp the object in the first place as anything beyond chaotic sense data. The lawful understanding and the free imagination must cooperate, and their resulting harmony (Kant's “lawfulness without a law”) demonstrates that there is no irreconcilable conflict among the faculties, so long as the perceiving subject is able to find an aesthetic ground on which they can cooperate. “Aesthetic pleasure is the feeling that accompanies and records this harmony,” so it is always associated with the full use of all faculties, an association that lays the groundwork for later theories of *Bildung* as well-roundedness or as the abolition of internal dissonances. Because aesthetic pleasure depends on the subject's willingness to disavow merely idiosyncratic pleasures, moreover, it is also the basis for a harmony between people which, like the harmony of the faculties, can rest on freedom rather than the suppression of difference. While this connection between aesthetics and politics is a peripheral element of Kant's philosophy, it is the central subject of Schiller's letters. “[W]e must indeed, if we are to solve [the] political problem in practice, follow the path of aesthetics,” Schiller writes, “since it is through Beauty that we will arrive at Freedom.” But if arriving at freedom is really the goal, and an organic culture is the means of realizing it, then why waste time thinking about aesthetics when society can be reformed directly? The ideal of a

perfectly rational and just state represents, for Schiller, humanity's moral telos, but in the coercive, unjust states that history has actually furnished, “[Man] could not and cannot as a moral being rest content – and woe to him if he could!”⁵

At this moment in Schiller's argument, then, the irrational state is an unmitigated evil, and the French Revolution might seem justified. While the laws of reason and its morality are fairly simple, however, and in fact have already been described to Schiller's satisfaction by Kant, the incarnation of those laws in social life cannot be an affair of reason alone. Until humanity has fully harmonized its moral sense with those elements of “animality which are [its] condition” as an embodied and historically situated collective, it cannot be ready to incarnate the moral state. On the other hand, humanity cannot abolish the state altogether, because the state, as Schiller will argue, is an indispensable ingredient in the fully human life he imagines. Therefore humanity must resign itself to living in an imperfect state, and look for a way to better itself within that state without recourse to revolution. As Schiller puts it, “physical society in time may not cease for an instant while moral society is being formed in idea, that for the sake of human dignity its very existence may be endangered.”

Considering the two sides of human character, the rational and the sensual or animal, Schiller sees no basis for improvement in the direction of a rational and just state. Salvation “is not to be found in the natural character of Man,” whose “selfish and violent” animal nature poses the initial problem; nor is it in “his [rational] character, which *ex hypothesi* has yet to be formed, and upon which,” for that reason, “the lawgiver can never [. . .] with certainty depend.” Schiller's solution is “to create a third character” that harmonizes, as far as possible, the best aspects of the other two, and which “without impeding the development of the moral character, might serve rather as a sensible pledge of a morality as yet unseen.” This third character is the aesthetic character, and it does for the other two characters

5. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 27-28.

what Kant's aesthetic perception does for the various psychological faculties: it harmonizes them, thereby eliminating their limitations and ending the subject's internal fragmentation. Schiller (rather drastically) simplifies Kant's faculties into "impulses": the natural character of humanity corresponds to what he calls the "sensuous impulse," the moral character to the "formal impulse," and they are harmonized in the aesthetic "play impulse." When the subject perceives an object in which sensuous appeal seems organized around a moral idea, or (to put it another way) a moral idea seems to be incarnated in sensuous reality, the impulses achieve harmony. The formal impulse will not demand that considerations of sensuous pleasure or pain be dismissed, as it does when it merely upholds unpleasant moral laws. And the sensuous impulse will not demand that considerations of morality be dismissed, as it does when its desire for pleasure conflicts with them.⁶

For Schiller, "this reciprocal relation of both impulses" is "the idea of [Man's] humanity, and consequently something infinite to which he can approximate ever nearer in the course of time, without ever reaching it." As the impulse associated with particularity, contingency, history, and embodiment harmonizes more and more with the impulse associated with universality and shared reason, the things that divide people from each other by appealing to their differently particular natures will assume less and less importance, and each person will come closer to the ideal of humanity in general. This ideal of humanity corresponds to the moral state. The "pure human being, who may be recognized more or less distinctively in every person, is represented by the State, the objective and, so to say, canonical form in which the diversity of persons endeavors to unite itself." As individuals learn to harmonize their individuality with the universal human image within themselves, they will more and more closely approximate within themselves the humanity of the ideal state.⁷

Schiller's ideal state cannot exist until its citizens achieve inner harmony. There are two ways, he

6. Ibid., p. 30.

7. Ibid., pp. 73, 31.

writes, in which any state can “affirm itself in individual citizens.” If an individual's idiosyncratic sensuous desires conflict with his or her moral ideas “in so contradictory a fashion that only the suppression of the former can secure the triumph of the latter, the State too will assume the full severity of the law against the citizen, and,” as the agent of morality, “must ruthlessly trample underfoot any such hostile individuality in order not to be its victim.” If, on the other hand, “the inner man is at one with himself” and his sensuous desires are already in harmony with his moral ideas, then “the State will be simply the interpreter of his fine instinct, the clearer expression of his inner legislation.” That is, he will already have accomplished the regulation of his own particular interests that the state exists to enforce. Schiller calls this latter situation “the individual becoming State,” and holds that this is the only way to fully reconcile individual and social life.⁸

Here, as Joseph Slaughter observes, Schiller's lofty ideals show themselves to be something uncomfortably familiar: the transition from the suppressive state based on “the full severity of law” to the state as representation of individuals' “inner legislation” is just what Michel Foucault has described as the transition from “pure subjection” by “the feudal authority of the sovereign” to the “disciplinary routines of self-regulation that are constitutive of the modern subject itself.” In this pessimistic reading, the subject's internal congruence with the will of the state is the result not of beautiful moral freedom but of the panoptic prison-house of modern power, and “the idea of [Man's] humanity” is merely the idea of the anxiously self-policing political subject. In Schiller's case this reading is plainly justified. Whether an analogous criticism applied to the Progressive Era's ideas of aesthetic education is a more open question.⁹

As we have seen, Schiller's letters introduce two plots of harmony that both mirror and support each other. In one, the potentially rivalrous sensuous and formal impulses achieve a mutually beneficial

8. Ibid., p. 33.

9. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, pp. 8-9.

harmony that abolishes turmoil within the individual mind. In the other, potentially rivalrous individuals, who are also potential rivals of the state, achieve a mutually beneficial harmony that abolishes turmoil in social life. The state therefore becomes to its individual citizens what the idea of Man's humanity is to the mind's rival impulses. These homologous plots are necessary for each other, because if individuals are required to abide by laws that are arbitrary and suppressive then they will not be able to harmonize their moral obligations to the state with their private sensuous desires, and if individuals are disposed to see morality as a force that violently suppresses such desires then they will not be able to understand or produce a state that does not function in that way. The individual's approach to the idea of Man's humanity as incarnated in the ideal state is therefore, paradoxically, both the goal of Schiller's developmental process and its necessary precondition. As Redfield puts it, the "subject's identification with a hypothetical formal community [is] both the engine and the telos of history," and this identification can easily manifest itself in nationalist jingoism.¹⁰

There is a third homologous plot of harmony as well, which Schiller locates in the act of aesthetic perception itself. In all three of these plots there are three "moments" in the transition from alienation and division to harmony and moral freedom: "Man in his physical condition is subject to the power of Nature alone; he shakes off this power in the aesthetic, and he controls it in the moral condition." "Those three moments," Schiller writes, "are indeed, regarded in general, the three different ages for the development of a whole humanity and for the development of individual man, but they may also be distinguished in every particular awareness of an object, and they are, in a word, the necessary conditions of every cognition which we receive through the senses." Within the act of perception, "the object of the sense impulse, expressed in a general concept, may be called life [. . .] which expresses all material being and all that is immediately present in the senses. The object of the form impulse, expressed generally, may be called shape [. . .] which includes all formal qualities of things and all their

10. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, p. 22.

relations to the intellectual faculties.” So, for example, the two impulses will see different things in a painting of a playing dog. The sense impulse will see the richness of the animal's fur, which will make it wish to touch it. It will see the dog's exuberant motions, and feel a sympathetic attraction based on its own experience of kinaesthetic pleasure. The form impulse, on the other hand, will see the abstract lines and shapes of which the painting is composed. Each of these perceptions is in potential conflict with the other: an excessive attention to form might distract the viewer from the simultaneous action of the dog's expression of life, and vice versa. But if the painter has composed the picture in such a way that the same representations of motion that gratify the senses are also formally pleasing as abstract shapes, then the painting has what Schiller calls “living shape, a concept which serves to denote all aesthetic qualities of phenomena and – in a word – what we call Beauty in the widest sense of the term.” This living shape is the object of the play impulse, and its emergence in the act of perception is Schiller's third homological site of harmony. Like the first two plots of harmony, this one is necessary for the others, because while “Beauty is [. . .] certainly an object for us [. . .] it is at the same time a state of our personality.” Our ability to recognize living form means that it must exist in the world to be recognized, but we can only recognize it for what it is when we feel the harmony of our two rival impulses. The production and consumption of beautiful objects both depends on and makes possible the individual's psychological harmony, which stands in the same double-bound relationship to the social harmony of the ideal state.¹¹

Although at such moments it appears that Schiller's three plots of harmony must unfold simultaneously, circularly causing each other, he suggests that there is in fact a certain order of precedence. Because a premature reform of the state would yield only another French Revolution, the individual must be reformed before the state. Individual reform, meanwhile, cannot generate itself *ex nihilo*, but it can receive an initial impulsion from encounters with beautiful objects made by people

11. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 113, 120, 76, 122.

who are already further along in the process of reform. Also, while individual culture is always constrained by the imperfection of the state, the state can never interfere with the production of beautiful objects. Or at least Schiller thought so, in a descriptive echo of the earlier, prescriptive argument of Wilhelm von Humboldt in his 1791 *On the Limits of State Action*. (The fact that *On the Limits of State Action* was the only text that John Stuart Mill expressly identified as an influence on his *On Liberty* suggests some of the through-lines running from German idealism to the democratic theory to which we will shortly turn). Schiller:

But are we perhaps not arguing in a circle? [. . .] All improvement in the political sphere is to proceed from the ennobling of the character – but how, under the influence of a barbarous constitution, can the character become ennobled? We should need, for this end, to seek out some instrument which the State does not afford us, and with it open up well-springs which will keep pure and clear throughout every political corruption. [. . .] This instrument is the Fine Arts, and these well-springs are opened up in their immortal examples. [. . .] The political legislator can enclose their territory, but he cannot govern within it. He can proscribe the friend of truth, but Truth endures; he can humiliate the artist, but Art he cannot debase.

The potentially educative qualities of beautiful objects endure even when all who encounter them are too debased to fully appreciate them, so in the long run, paradoxically, the arts advance linearly even while the mutual production of individuals, states, and art objects advance circularly. Schiller compares the problem of the circular causality of his plots of harmony to that of a mechanic working on a ticking clock: “When the mechanic has the works of a clock to repair, he lets the wheels run down; but the living clockwork of the State must be repaired while it is in motion, and here it is a case of changing the wheels as they revolve. We must therefore search for some support” that will not be affected by the wheels' running or not. That support is the beautiful, educative object.¹²

But this object, or “exemplar” as Redfield has it, is beautiful and educative only because it realizes the latent potential for harmony in the minds of individuals who behold it. So when individuals seek an exemplar, they seek something whose definition has been transcribed from their own inner nature, even as it enlarges that nature by unveiling more and more of its true outlines. Again, the direction of

12. Ibid., pp. 51, 29.

causality implied here is almost circular; or, as Redfield puts it, it represents

a progress in the form of a spiral or transumptive return, which is the only form of progress possible for a system of exemplarity. [. . .] An identity must be formed through identification with an example: a model that on the one hand is the true identity of the identity-to-be-formed, but on the other hand is separated from the ephebe by the temporality or process of *Bildung* itself. [. . . T]he subject must identify with the model in order to become what the subject already is; however, this also means that the subject must not identify with anything --- particularly not a master or exemplar --- that is not always already the subject itself.

Individuals must look outside of themselves to discover their true identity, and must know their true identity in order to know where outside of themselves to look. They can never wholly confirm that the exemplar is suitable until they open themselves to its influence, at which point they are also fatally exposed the chance that the exemplar will prove miseducative, even abusive. As Redfield argues, this unresolved confusion at the heart of *Bildung* makes it less a way of abolishing the rule of chance and arbitrary power than a way of disguising that rule as the individual's true wish. To the degree that social status plays a role in the selection of exemplars, *Bildung* becomes a powerful tool for vested interests, if those interests can make themselves seem exemplary in Schiller's sense. In Franco Moretti's terms, *Bildung* facilitates a confusion between "ethic" and "practice," repackaging the dominant cultural order as an incarnation of the ideal cultural order.

[T]he dominant ethic and the dominant praxis --- do not as a rule coincide. This is particularly true for bourgeois society: and from this discrepancy springs its peculiar political pugnaciousness, its unceasing dissatisfaction with the way principles are 'realized', its characteristic dynamism. But...

But if what has been said in this chapter is true, then the classical Bildungsroman does not aim at promoting that pugnaciousness and that dynamism. Its goal is not to heighten the discrepancy, but to make it disappear. Here is world is truly what it claims to be; what it should be according to the principles of the dominant ethic. The 'education' of Wilhelm [Meister] and Elizabeth [Bennett] also consists in the acknowledgement that social superiority and moral superiority are one and the same.

In the logic of exemplarity, the ephebes will always think they recognize themselves in their exemplars, even if that recognition is false; and in real societies exemplars tend to be drawn from the tastes of the upper strata. *Bildung*, then, becomes a way of keeping up with the Joneses' version of inner harmony, a conspicuous consumption of modes of perception that always feels like a revelation of inner truth.

Although *Bildung* “manifests the universal disinterestedness of aesthetic culture, [it] also (therefore) occurs as the accumulation of sensuous forms of this universality, and thus always remains exposed to its seeming opposite, philistinism --- and more generally [. . .] to the commodity form and the ruses of capital.”¹³

In a further turn of the screw, Schiller suggests that other individuals, as well as states, can be exemplars, in the form of the “cultivated person” and the “Aesthetic State” respectively. Schiller concludes his letters by describing the aesthetic state, which, being based on the harmonious liberation of impulses within people and of people within the state, “grant[s] freedom by means of freedom.” This state, again, can be seen from behind as a Foucauldian technology of control, which is especially clear when Schiller emphasizes freedom's asymptotic convergence with its apparent opposite, predictability:

[T]he will of Man stands completely free between duty and inclination, and no physical compulsion can or may encroach upon this sovereign right of his personality. If therefore he is to retain this capacity for choice and nevertheless be a reliable link in the causal concatenation of forces, this can only be achieved if the operations of both those motives in the realm of phenomena prove to be exactly similar [. . .] so that his impulses are sufficiently consonant with his reason to have the value of a universal legislation.

The cultivated subjects of the aesthetic state will never feel this freedom as compulsion, because their cultivation itself, by definition, prevents them from feeling truly just legislation as external compulsion rather than as personal inclination itself. When Schiller claims that “Beauty alone can confer on [Man] a social character,” he means, in part, that individual character and social norms will be impossible to disentangle. In granting freedom by means of freedom, the aesthetic state makes the multitude an offer it cannot refuse, because it cannot even perceive it as an offer, rather than as its own private longing.¹⁴

“As a need,” Schiller claims, the aesthetic state “exists in every fine tuned soul.” “[A]s an achievement,” however, it exists, “like the pure Church, or the pure Republic, only in a few select circles [. . .] where [Man] has no need [. . .] to encroach upon another's freedom in order to assert his

13. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, pp. 21, 49; Moretti, *Way of the World*, p. 72; Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, p. 53.

14. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 137, 31, 140.

own.” As many critics have observed, the Tower Society of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* fictionalizes Schiller's aesthetic state as just such a “select circle,” complete with the confusions about agency that Schiller's model implies. The Society secretly manipulates the circumstances of Wilhelm's life, intervening, in various disguises, to induce him to leave the theater and pursue his *Bildung* with them instead.¹⁵ As Redfield argues, Wilhelm's dissatisfaction with the theater as an arena for *Bildung* stems from the fact that he only enjoys playing parts that already resemble his true personality, so he cannot deliberately expand that personality by playing other roles. On the other hand, the really talented actors that he meets succeed precisely because they divorce their stage personae from their true personality. In Redfield's ingenious reading of Wilhelm's career, when the Society saves Wilhelm's production of Hamlet by providing a genuinely scary ghost, thereby helping the untalented Wilhelm pull off the scene, Wilhelm realizes that for him, unlike the other actors, “identification is [not] an intentional act,” and “the aesthetic power of his performance is the result of an event over which he has no control.” Offstage, “the self is not an actor,” because it “cannot intend the [. . .] construction” of itself. If the self knew what kind of self to become, it would already be that self. So personal growth must depend on the intervention of a well-meaning outside force that is able to temporarily efface itself. For Schiller, this is just the role played by the Society of the Tower:

this idea of mastery [*Meisterschaft*, one name for the hypothetical end state of *Bildung*, as well as a pun on Wilhelm's surname], which is the work of ripened and whole experience, cannot itself guide the novel's hero; it cannot and must not stand before him as his purpose and goal, since as soon as he were to imagine the goal, he would have *eo ipso* already attained it. Rather, the idea of mastery must stand as a leader behind him.

Schiller's comments can be juxtaposed with Wilhelm's own statement of purpose:

The cultivation of my individual self, here as I am, has from my youth upwards been constantly though dimly my wish and my purpose [. . .] Now this harmonious cultivation of my nature, which has been denied me by birth, is exactly what I most long for.

As Slaughter points out, Wilhelm's double need to both be true to his inner nature, “here as I am,” and

15. Ibid., p. 140.

to cultivate himself into something different from what he already is leads him, necessarily, to rely on the Tower Society as an external supplement to his self. For this reason, in Slaughter's terms, *Bildung* must always be “sponsored” by an outside agent whose interests threaten to diverge from the ephebe's.¹⁶

For Slaughter, who, resonantly punning on the idea of “development,” reads *Wilhelm Meister* as the paradigm for the *Bildungsromane* of the developing world that are his main subjects, the United Nations and developmental NGOs stand in for the Tower Society and the citizens of the nations they interpellate as “underdeveloped” stand in for Wilhelm. These ephebes of the Global South “learn the hard lesson that the atomistic, self-sufficient individual,” Wilhelm's “self, here as I am,” is a “hyperbole that is not to be taken literally.” “If sovereignty means the sustained and self-sustaining capacity to legislate [. . .] for oneself [. . . then] the human person is not a self-determinative [. . .] agent – is never free to sponsor itself. [. . .] Development is always sponsored elsewhere, and the sovereign human personality is, at best, suzerain.” Indeed, the *Bildungsroman's* logic of exemplarity attracts the genre to what Slaughter calls the “incorporation” of marginal subjects into the projects of “mastery,” such as global economic development and international human rights law, emanating from, and often plainly advancing interests in, the world's cultural capitals. The self-mastery arising from engagement with the beautiful, because it purports to rely on universal elements of human psychology, can become a claim to mastery of other people.¹⁷

As Schiller puts it, “We enjoy the pleasures of the senses simply as individuals [. . .] We enjoy the pleasures of knowledge simply as a race, and by carefully removing every trace of individuality from our judgement [. . .] It is only the Beautiful that we enjoy at the same time as an individual and a race, that is, as representatives of the race.” By Schiller's logic here, as Redfield observes, the uncultivated

16. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, p. 76; Schiller quoted from *ibid.*, p. 67; *Wilhelm Meister* quoted from Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, p. 97; Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, p. 214.

17. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, p. 215.

“‘native,’ or, *mutatis mutandis*, the working-class or feminine subject [can] be represented as incomplete rather than different,” as a “child” relative to the cultivated and empowered bourgeois white man who better represents humanity as a whole. So “the politics of [*Bildung*] derive from the seeming benevolence and normativity of a pedagogical model,” and *Bildung* “receives its most elaborate institutional manifestation in pedagogical contexts,” whether these are literal schools, “select circles” of cultivation such as the Tower Society, or the quasi-pedagogical institutions whose mission is global development. “As part of its social work,” Slaughter observes, “the idealist *Bildungsroman* conventionalizes and naturalizes the convoluted temporality of incorporation as the normal process by which historically marginal subjects are to become [. . .] citizens,” but these conventions also preserve the power relationships inherent in pedagogy: teacher and student, adult and child, exemplar and ephebe.¹⁸

These “children” will never necessarily grow up, because, as Schiller writes, *Bildung*'s end state is “something infinite to which [Man] can approximate ever nearer in the course of time, without ever reaching it.” Like Kant's purposive-but-purposeless aesthetic object, *Bildung* has no end other than itself, which means, in practice, that it cannot end. The ephebe can never overtake the exemplar, or at least can never overcome the need for some exemplar. In contemporary postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, Slaughter sees this dynamic still at work:

In the abstract, an idealist human rights form of the contemporary *Bildungsroman* would novelize the aspirational narrative of incorporation articulated in international law that takes citizenship as the ultimate expression of human sociality and personality. Rarely, if ever, does the story of human personality development narrated in any particular novel fulfill the plot ideal [. . .] Such narrative unfulfillment --- what Bakhtin called “unfinalizability,” or that “unfinalizable something in man” --- has become a generic virtue and constitutive feature of the contemporary postcolonial *Bildungsroman*.

The *Bildungsroman* continues to patrol the margins of the capitals of culture, promising to incorporate *Bildung*'s children as full citizens but never actually releasing them from tutelage. Kant believed that

18. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 128; Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, pp. 25-26; Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, p. 27.

the ideal state could only grow by the process of elevating its subjects from dependents into economically and culturally autonomous citizens, but Schiller's unfolding of the logic of exemplarity latent in Kant's ideas suggests that the promise of that elevation is more important than its realization, which must be indefinitely deferred.¹⁹

Bildung, then, is “a task that [. . .] present[s] itself as infinite,” so that it predictably “becomes understandable as an ironic predicament and easily acquires the tonality of melancholy,” at which point the *Bildungsroman* becomes “the exemplary novelistic genre of failure or loss.” Once the ephebe has learned enough about *Bildung* to understand its dependence on exemplars, and has learned enough about the world to recognize that all exemplars are fallible, then he or she “‘matures,’ either in a wry or a penseroso mode, by transforming loss into the knowledge of loss,” as Redfield has it. If anyone does go through the *Bildung* process successfully, it is by the sheerest luck, as Wilhelm Meister acknowledges, “I know I have attained a happiness which I have not deserved.” Ultimately Wilhelm does not succeed or fail by his own efforts, but by the fortuitous harmony between himself and the Society of the Tower. Slaughter finds that this ending is still appropriate in those contemporary *Bildungsromane* at the incorporative margins of world literature:

[T]he emergence of historical consciousness [. . .] becomes a consciousness of the sociopolitical complicity of the *Bildungsroman* with particular dispensations of power, which amount to a consciousness of the contingency of the universal, hegemonic narrative of self-determination and human personality development promoted by human rights law. *Bildung* becomes *Bildung* to the second degree, in which the *Bildungshelden* affirm the right to free and full human personality development even as they recognize the historical uses and abuses of *Bildung*, the *Bildungsroman*, and the human rights discourse of self-determination and (personality) development.

Slaughter's “*Bildung* to the second degree” has a more positive valence than Redfield's “ironic predicament,” because Slaughter believes that the rights to free and full development within social life around which *Bildung* revolves are inherently valuable, whereas Redfield suggests that the whole idea of such development must be understood primarily as a dangerous mask of power, albeit one that

19. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 73; Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, p. 315;

remains inextricable from Western subjectivity.²⁰

For contemporary critics, then, the *Bildung* of Kant and Schiller is in varying degrees both a promise and a threat. It promises a social harmony that is difficult to distinguish from nationalist jingoism, a personal autonomy difficult to distinguish from Foucauldian discipline, and an aesthetic experience difficult to distinguish from commodity fetishism. As Redfield in particular suggests, because *Bildung* stakes the self in a project that covertly depends on the will of others and on pure chance, the subject that is open to *Bildung* is also open to spiritual and even bodily mutilation. For Slaughter and Redfield, *Bildung* is a case of philosophical hubris, of a will to intellectually contain a process, democratization, that is far more messy, dangerous, and often painful than Schiller's idealized concepts can express. For them, the *Bildungsroman*, which as literature is more open to the unruliness of lived experience, provides a necessary corrective to *Bildung* philosophy, albeit not always a wholly oppositional one. As we turn to the American context, we will find that Slaughter's *Bildung* to the second degree, in which practicing literary artists, such as Cahan and Cather, are both drawn to and repelled by the extravagant promises of aesthetic education, a particularly apt framework. We will also, however, encounter figures, such as Orestes Brownson, for whom Redfield's wholly critical attitude toward *Bildung*, “wry or pensive” rather than hopefully ambivalent, is a better fit, and others, such as Gilman, for whom some version of a *Bildung* project remains wholly viable.

Aesthetic Education and the American School: From Horace Mann to the One Best System

Like the German *Bildung* theorists, the common school movement spearheaded by Horace Mann in the 1830s and 1840s sought to reconcile social stability with individual autonomy by promoting a shared culture organized around a balance among mental faculties in each citizen. Mann's common school

20. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, p. 53; *Wilhelm Meister* quoted in *ibid.*, p. 78; Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, p. 269.

ideal, in which children of diverse backgrounds find common ground in the pursuit of mental discipline, had more to do, in the words of education scholar Charles Glenn, with “education [...] the political role of schooling in shaping the character of the American people,” than with “instruction, the imparting of skills and objective knowledge.” Like Schiller before him, Mann feared that democracy was being extended to people who would abuse it. “The great experiment of Republicanism, – of the capacity of man for self-government, – is to be tried anew,” Mann declared in an 1842 Fourth of July oration; but “wherever it has been tried – in Greece, in Rome, in Italy – [it] has failed, through an incapacity in the people to enjoy liberty without abusing it.” By “self-government,” Mann meant not just political democracy but individual self-discipline, or “a voluntary compliance with the laws of reason and duty,” and sees these two faces of democracy as inextricable.²¹

The pedagogy of “self-government” that Mann favored in his early career was based on a somewhat fluid picture of faculty psychology emanating from the Scottish Enlightenment. This psychology, as the historian Daniel Walker Howe has documented, was the backdrop against which many major American thinkers, from Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards to the *Federalist Papers* authors, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau, debated the relationship between society and individual character. Whereas Schiller saw the drives that were harmonized in aesthetic experience as equal in dignity, the Scottish faculty psychology comprised a hierarchical ordering. “First in order of precedence,” Howe writes, “came the rational faculties of the will: conscience (or the moral sense) and prudence (or self-interest).” In educational circles, the rational will was also subdivided into memory, attention, and other cognitive categories. Below the rational will “were the emotional springs of action, called either by the approving term 'affections' or the more derogatory word 'passions,' as the context might dictate. Still further down were mechanical impulses like reflexes, not subject to conscious control at all.” Educators often described the faculties as muscles,

21. Glenn, *American Model of State and School*, p. 48; Mann quoted in Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997, p. 161.

which would grow if exerted and atrophy if ignored. Whatever hierarchy of faculties a given thinker preferred, pedagogy consisted in fitting the higher ones to rule the lower.²²

Mann based his pedagogy on the idea that the lower faculties develop before the higher ones. One had to ascend a “ladder” from the passions upward to reason; once reason was attained, it was to chasten and subordinate the passions that had paved the way for it. This was accomplished by giving the passions healthy outlets during the younger years, and then gradually training up the rational will (in its various aspects of memory, attention, and so on) with rote learning assignments that were deliberately unappealing to the passions.

One reason that the pedagogy of mental discipline was so popular was that, because it was unconcerned with communicating particular propositions, it might sidestep the question of indoctrination, while nonetheless training moral character. Mental disciplinarians viewed the curriculum as an obstacle course that would beef up mental muscles, not a menu of ideas to be internalized. As the educator Charles De Garmo facetiously put it in 1895, "It is well, therefore, to cram the mind with the largest possible number of facts in geography, history, and language, it mattering little whether the facts are concrete or abstract, related or disparate, interesting or stupid, since, forsooth, they all train the memory." Another reason for its popularity was that it was cheap. Mental disciplinarians saw no need to keep textbooks up-to-date, nor to hire highly educated teachers. It was thus an apt pedagogy for an educational system still struggling for coordination.²³

Despite the theoretical value-neutrality of mental discipline, Mann (again like Schiller) was sensitive to the danger that he might be imposing a partisan agenda rather than an unobjectionable and universal program for the liberation of all individuals. He most often encountered this issue in religious

22. Howe, *Making the American Self*, p. 130. For the role of the mental-muscle metaphor in the history of curriculum design, see Tanner, Daniel and Laurel Tanner. *History of the School Curriculum*. New York : Macmillan; London : Collier Macmillan, 1990, p. 41; and Pinar, William et al. *Understanding Curriculum*. New York : P. Lang, 1995, p. 73.

23. De Garmo, Charles. *Herbart and the Herbartians*. New York : C. Scribner's sons, 1896, p. 38.

terms. While he believed that religion, as an inalienable element of the psychological system balanced out by mental discipline, belonged in the schools, he insisted that it be nonsectarian: "that pure religion of heaven on which all good men agree," stripped of doctrinal particulars. This agreeably parsimonious religion, however, bore a striking resemblance to Mann's own rationalistic, civic-minded Unitarianism, and Catholics in particular protested that his supposedly neutral ground was anything but. At the same time, his pedagogy of rational self-government was, as a theory of the whole person, unmistakably informed by his Unitarian outlook. When he began to bring the normal schools under state control, although he ostensibly confined their curriculum to "scientific" pedagogy, Orestes Brownson accused him of establishing a state religion. Although Mann waved it off, Brownson's objection cuts to the heart of the project of democratic education; if one takes it seriously, American teaching comes to seem, in Charles Glenn's words, like "a semi-profession more similar to a religious teaching order, informed by a belief in its calling, than an autonomous profession, based on specialized expertise."²⁴

Although it never played a major role in his thinking, Mann did consider the role that art could play in the common school. In the 8th of his celebrated Annual Reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education he suggests that there is a "preadaptation of the human mind to seek and to find pleasure in music" which is found with "universality" in "each nation and each age." This "interest" applies to all the arts, Mann argues, but music merits attention in the common school because it is freely available to all. He regards music as an aid to tranquility for any person, in any circumstance, and reports that the use of music in Prussian schools reduces the need for corporal punishment. In terms of his faculty psychology, he finds that vocal music in particular promotes health at the level of the automatic functions, by improving lung power, e.g.; pro-social feelings at the middle level of the affective or passional faculties, since it has a "natural [...] affinity with peace, hope, affection, generosity, charity,

24. Glenn, *American Model of State and School*, pp. 190, 187, 174. For antebellum American educators' views on fiction, see Martin, Terence. *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction*. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969.

devotion”; and acuity of the rational faculties, due to the "mathematical relations" among tones. Music for Mann thus confirms the mutual adaptability of all parts of the psychological system, much as art does for Schiller. On the other hand, Mann distrusts fiction, finding it too often misleading and self-indulgent. Under his leadership, the common school movement in Massachusetts fought for music in the schools, successfully, but left fiction alone.²⁵

Later in his career, while visiting schools in Prussia, Mann discovered the ideas the Swiss schoolmaster Johann Pestalozzi, who opened a school for children orphaned by the war with Napoleon in the city of Stans in 1798. Pestalozzi's aim was to restore his students to the natural course of development that the war had disrupted. His insight was that children naturally build up knowledge by moving gradually from simple observations to complex ideas; force-feeding them abstractions produces empty and disjointed thinking. He would begin instruction in drawing, for example, by asking children to observe simple shapes such as long and short lines and different types of curves. Then he would move on to two-dimensional figures such as circles and squares, then complex figures composed of many shapes put together, then perspective and three-dimensional figures such as cubes and spheres, and finally real three-dimensional objects from life. Pestalozzi taught all subjects in this way, never introducing a concept whose full understanding depended on a simpler concept that had not yet been internalized. The bedrock beneath the simplest concepts was immediate sense impressions. Any abstraction that was not derived from these impressions in an unbroken manner was not really teachable, Pestalozzi held. The educator's task was to devise continuous pathways leading from various sense impressions to the abstract ideas that she eventually wanted to teach. One outgrowth of Pestalozzi's thought was the “object lesson,” in which particular objects, sometimes natural objects such as a plant, sometimes special objects designed specifically for Pestalozzian pedagogy, were

25. Mann, Horace. *Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education*. New York: Hugh Birch-Horace Mann Fund of the National Education Association, 1950 (1844).

introduced in order to kick off this process.²⁶

While mental discipline tended to isolate objects from their contexts by breaking knowledge down into factoids, Pestalozzian pedagogy did the opposite. It was indifferent to faculty psychology and its image of the mind as a set of muscles that needed to be pumped up in a balanced way to produce a coherent self. Instead, it was concerned with the coherence of the student's mental image of the world. Like the mental disciplinarians, though, and like Schiller, Pestalozzi believed that his particular recipe for mental coherence would produce political harmony. Pestalozzi, a great admirer of Rousseau's *Emile*, identified disjunctive learning with deceit, decadence, and exploitation, and his own type of concrete and gradual learning with authenticity and the republican politics of Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

On the one hand, Pestalozzi is the grandfather of "child-centered" education organized around the student's distinct perspective. On this level his pedagogy gratified Mann's desire for a truly democratic education that would leave students their freedom. On another level, though, he introduces a fine-grained control over the basic building blocks of cognition that could appeal to educators with undemocratic intentions. In 1835, an English translation of Victor Cousin's glowing report on Pestalozzian pedagogy for the French king appeared in the United States, and while Mann and other school promoters saw pedagogical pay dirt and began traveling to Europe to learn the new system, others, sharing Orestes Brownson's skepticism, denounced Pestalozzianism as a tool of tyrannical monarchs and overly centralized government. The earliest appearance of Pestalozzianism in the United States reflects both its radical democracy and its potential as a tool of social control: it was the official educational philosophy of New Harmony, William Maclure's utopian community in which the school was to be the capstone of a society streamlined into one "total institution[al]" life.²⁷

26. For Pestalozzi's impact on American art education, see Efland, Arthur. *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*. New York : Teachers College Press, 1990, p. 77.

27. Glenn, *American Model of State and School*, p. 49.

Despite the lively debate it sparked in the antebellum years, Pestalozzian pedagogy would only make a significant impact on American educational practice once the system had already been streamlined. Pestalozzi's methods require small age-graded classes and highly trained teachers, and even in Massachusetts these conditions did not prevail until after the Civil War. Mann's enthusiasm for Pestalozzi was indirectly important for the direction of the educational profession, but his direct impact was mainly on nuts-and-bolts issues: making teacher certification mandatory, ensuring that normal schools could furnish those certifications, securing salaries for teachers commensurate with their professional status, enlarging the role of state government in education, and raising the taxes necessary to pay for better schools and teachers.²⁸

After Mann left educational promotion for a Congressional career in the late 1840s, William Torrey Harris became the prevailing spirit of US educational consolidation. Harris is an important transitional figure, in terms of both the theory and practice of education, between Mann's version of education for individual self-government and the progressive educators' visions of education for coordinated social action that Cahan, Cather, and Gilman encountered. On the practical side, Harris served as superintendent of the St. Louis schools from 1867 to 1880, where he applied a number of European advances in the "science of education," such as the kindergarten, and worked to expand the number of students in schools and the lengths of time they stayed there. In 1889 Harris became the first United States Commissioner of Education, a largely symbolic position that nonetheless greatly increased the visibility of his ideas.²⁹

That must have suited Harris, since he was a philosopher of national eminence, whose *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* was America's first (quasi-)professional journal in that field. (As editor of the

28. Greene, Maxine. *The Public School and the Private Vision: A Search for America in Education and Literature*. New York: Random House, 1965, p. 50.

29. Tyack, David B. *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974, p. 296.

Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Harris was the first to tell a young Dewey that he might do well as a professional philosopher.) Harris's Right Hegelian philosophy dovetailed perfectly with his educational role. He heard of Hegel from a German refugee, Henry Conrad Brokmeyer, who believed that his philosophy of man's realization in the state offered a remedy for his home country's failure to achieve social and political unification. Harris, living in a state divided by the Missouri Compromise, and later by neighbor-against-neighbor fighting in the Civil War, felt much the same. In the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, he insisted on the subordination of "brittle individualism" to an "established law" that would channel people's energies into a common life. As Commissioner of Education, accordingly, while trying, like Mann, to reconcile individuality and social order, he nonetheless argued for the "repression" of "all that interferes with the function of the school"; this function, in turn, he defined as the development of the "higher ideal nature" that formed the "true inward self of our fellow man", and which impelled each person to recapitulate humanity's ascent from individualistic "barbarism" to the civilized heights of a "spiritual establishment." This sounds, of course, a great deal like Schiller.³⁰

Indeed, Harris, more so than Mann, also integrated art into his educational vision, and once again we see a leading educator arguing that art simultaneously promotes both individual self-realization and social order, and, implicitly, that its existence proves that these goals are ultimately coterminous in an "idea of Man's humanity" or "higher ideal nature." Harris outlines his notion of "aesthetic education" in a remarkable 1897 tract entitled *Art Education: The True Industrial Education*. He begins by considering one of the least exalted, but increasingly important, functions of the public school, that of training an economically competitive workforce. After briefly acknowledging the roles of manual training, science, and logical thinking in workforce preparation, he asserts that

aesthetic education -- the cultivation of taste, the acquirement of knowledge on the subject of the origin of the idea of beauty (both its historic origin and the philosophical account of its source in human

30. Greene, *Public School and the Private Vision*, pp. 116-17.

nature), the practice of producing the outlines of the beautiful by the arts of drawing, painting, and modelling, the criticism of works of art, with a view to discover readily the causes of failure or of success in aesthetic effects -- all these things we must claim form the true foundation of the highest success in the industries of any modern nation.

He supports this claim, first, with a torrent of statistics that seem designed to win over industrialists comparing what he sees as an aesthetically backward Sweden with an aesthetically advanced Belgium. He notes that America imports mostly raw materials from the former and mostly manufactured goods from the latter. When he turns to the question of what constitutes aesthetic worth, however, he abruptly shifts to a highly abstract condensation of Hegelian aesthetics, in which art expresses "the soul[s] deligh[t] to behold itself" and the aesthetic principles of repetition, symmetry, and harmony mimic the ascending stages of a developing self-consciousness. Repetition corresponds to the self's recognition of itself, over and over again, in the world of objects, and symmetry with the further recognition that there is both antithesis and identity between self and object (as a symmetrically reversed image is both identical and opposite to its original). In the highest aesthetic stage, that of harmony, an infinite variety of differences are unified, not by simple identity, but by fusion in a shared "subservien[ce] to a common purpose." This final model of the soul's unity is also, when scaled up, a model of the subservience of the "brittle individual" to the common "spiritual establishment" of the state. Finding the principle of harmony best represented in Greek art, he recommends that ancient Greece be made the center of the American arts curriculum. (In practice, meticulous Pestalozzian line drawing, with its direct commercial applications, dominated the arts curriculum, such as it was, throughout Harris's career.)³¹

Even as he pushed for a larger, more thoroughly conformist, and more economically focused school system, Harris maintained a genuine philosophical commitment to the self-realization of individuals. The system that he helped usher in, however, was soon inherited by a new breed of educator who dropped even the "rhetoric of individual redemption and moral renewal" and avowedly

31. Harris, William Torrey. *Art Education: The True Industrial Education*. Syracuse, NY: C.W. Bardeen, 1897.

pursued only "aggregate social and economic aims." These "administrative progressives" represented the most powerful face of an American educational profession that, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, had finally come into its own. In addition to training rank and file teachers, education schools were now granting advanced degrees in administration, training (almost exclusively) men to fill the position of superintendent of schools. More and more American cities were hiring superintendents, who applied their objective expertise (or, for an Orestes Brownson or a Charles Glenn, their knowledge of the mysteries of the educational religion) to responsibilities that would otherwise have rested with boards of education. The rise of the superintendent was in fact part of a wider campaign to limit the powers of local, elected boards, which elite educational reformers saw as too short-sighted, too old-fashioned, too beholden to urban political machines, and, for many at least, too ethnic and too working-class to be trusted. The reformers, a coalition of nativists, Mugwumps, and corporate interests as well as the increasingly autonomous and self-promoting educational profession itself, believed that in modern industrial conditions, control of the schools would have to be made more centralized, scientific and "disinterested" (i.e., shielded from local politics) if democracy was to survive.³²

The democratic vision of the reformers was a strange mixture of modernization and nostalgia. On the one hand, it reflected newfound confidence in the dependability of an increasingly empirical and statistical science of education, a faith that experimental research could discover a "one best system" that would not need input from local boards because "the best is the best everywhere." Only citizens educated in the one best system would be fit for the complexities of self-government in an industrial age. In the name of democracy, the administrative progressives not only wrested school governance from local control, but also made the school itself into a training ground for coordinated obedience. "Punctuality, regularity, attention, and silence," Harris had written, are the habits "necessary through life for successful combination with fellows in an industrial civilization." The administrative

32. Tyack, *One Best System*, p. 29.

progressives made such ideas even blunter: the purpose of the school, wrote Boston superintendent John Philbrick, is the "imposition of tasks; if the pupil likes it, well; if not, no matter." For the most part, the ideal of aesthetic education, and the synthesis it was supposed to effect between individual and social prerogatives, was absent from the thinking of the administrative progressives. On the other hand, the democratic community in the name of which all this imposition was justified was one in which, as in some wishful version of the eighteenth century, divisions of national origin and class identification were to play no role; the administrative progressive school would be a "prototype of a conservative republic" amidst the mounting economic and ethnic tensions of the era.³³

The administrative progressives' one best system was, far more so than the "pedagogical progressivism" of the project method or the child-centered classroom, the major trend in American Education around the turn of the twentieth century. When we turn to the wider intellectual history of the Progressive Era, however, we find a widespread interest in a "politics of personal growth" (in the words of Casey Nelson Blake) that resembles the very *Bildung* idea that the administrative progressives so decisively abandoned. Randolph Bourne sums it up as "an artistic longing for an environment where we [all] will be able to exercise our capacities, and assert the untrammelled influences which we believe might be ours." While Mann (and Schiller, for that matter) hoped that aesthetic education might fit people for membership in a society of equals living, as it were, peacefully side by side, and while Harris hoped it would fit them to take their assigned part in great collective undertakings, the Progressive Era saw the rise of a new ideal of aesthetic education that aimed to fit people for social action, i.e., for participation in large-scale decision-making.³⁴

33. Ibid., p. 40.

34. Blake, Casey Nelson. *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990, pp. 6, 63.

Progressivism and the Social Action Ideal

Each variant of the *Bildung* idea constitutes a response to the removal of some constraint on democracy, whether that manifests as a post-revolutionary freedom from aristocracy (Schiller, Moretti, Redfield), a post-colonial freedom from imperialism (Slaughter, Pheng). Mann was responding to the post-Jacksonian expansion of the franchise to all (white) men, and particularly to immigrants who did not share the dominant WASP culture. Harris marks a special turn in this; he was not primarily concerned with the expansion of democracy to new people or places, but with an expanding conception of the scope of democratic activity, as the large organization, in business, government, and school, became a fixture of American society. The notions of aesthetic education toward which the figures examined in the body of this study converged were, like Harris's, inspired by the perception of a qualitative rather than a quantitative change. For the intellectuals discussed in this section, the change had to do with ideas, about economics, psychology, and politics, as much as it did with social conditions. Progressivism, indeed, is best understood not as a political movement, nor even as a coherent political tendency, but as an intellectual phenomenon: the dissolution of a once-robust post-Civil-War consensus about laissez-faire policies and the “atomistic empiricism, psychological hedonism, and utilitarian ethics” that provided their intellectual foundation. The breakdown of this consensus created a vacuum into which rushed new ideas and political formations.³⁵

On the political side, the cracks in the old consensus were exacerbated by a crisis in the current system of party politics. After the compromise of 1877 swept the question of the Southern racial order off the national political stage, the two major parties really differed little over many substantive issues, and especially over domestic economic policy. They clashed over high-temperature issues such as English-only schools, but those culture wars had little effect on the way business was done. As James T.

35. Rodgers, Daniel. "In Search of Progressivism." *Reviews in American History*. 10.4 (1982): 113-132; see also Rodgers, Daniel. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.

Kloppenberg puts it, “the largely symbolic quality of late nineteenth century politics [. . .] illustrates the nearly unanimous desire to clear the field for capitalist expansion.” Competition between the parties was largely a matter of building patronage networks in the form of political machines, which were notoriously prone to corruption. During the 1890s, good-government campaigners successfully introduced reforms that undermined these machines. Voters' loyalty to the parties declined, and voter turnout dropped. Into the resulting political vacuum stepped a dizzying variety of extra-party groups: corporate lobbyists, professional organizations, labor unions, and interest groups dedicated to various causes ranging from temperance to women's suffrage. Many of these groups wanted the one thing that the earlier consensus had not allowed: a breach of the wall between government and business, either in the service of business-government partnership or of government regulation of business in the interests of workers or consumers. These groups appropriated the language of “reform,” and by 1910 of “progressivism.” They formed a complex web of coalitions, to which politicians attempted to hitch their wagons. By the 1912 presidential election, both Wilson and Roosevelt were running as self-identified “progressives.” What made all of these different types of progressives progressive was their rapid abandonment of the once-unshakable nineteenth-century laissez-faire consensus, even though they departed from it in altogether different directions.³⁶

There were parallel developments on the intellectual side. Morton White dubs the era's dominant intellectual project a “revolt against formalism,” but, as Daniel Rodgers says, what White means by “formalism” is really one particular set of formal fictions, derived from Adam Smith, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill, which describe individuals as autonomous, self-interested atoms bound together only by contracts, and which underwrote laissez-faire policies. By the end of the nineteenth century these formal fictions were threatened by two alternative vocabularies. In the preceding century and a half, throughout the Atlantic world, the market had relentlessly expanded “the primacy of price and profit”

36. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, p. 173; Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism.”

into all domains of life, sweeping away traditional customs and loyalties that interfered with its “natural laws.” The unchecked market contributed to a host of new “social problems,” such as increasing economic inequality, the growth of large cities with inadequate municipal services, and a volatile labor market buffeted about by a seesawing boom-bust cycle. Laissez-faire formalisms had no answers to these problems, or even any way to recognize them as problems. Into this descriptive vacuum rushed a new popular vocabulary of the “social”: “social problem,” “social politics,” “social work” (the first new vocabulary). What bound this diffuse vocabulary together was the conviction that there had to be some limit to the operation of the unregulated market. People who used the new vocabulary of the social, the champions of “social politics,” were one subset of the progressives, who should be distinguished from corporate progressives whose interest in state-business cooperation was really about subordinating the state to business. Even within this subset, though, there was a confusing variety of motivations and ideas. Practitioners of social politics proposed their checks on the market in the name of a wide variety of alternative values and philosophies. Anyone looking to put social politics on a coherent intellectual footing would have to do a lot of synthesizing.

That challenge was met by the second vocabulary that challenged the laissez-faire formalisms: the radicalized empiricism of academic researchers and pragmatist philosophers. The rise of statistics in the social sciences raised questions about economic formalisms; laboratory work in psychology raised similar questions about psychological formalisms; and pragmatism in philosophy raised questions about the usefulness of formalisms in general, about humanity's ability to discover immutable “natural laws” in any area of inquiry. These developments presented both a promise and a threat. The threat was that by attacking the very notion of certainty, they might bring about paralysis and anomie. They implied that lived experience trumped a priori axioms, and the burden this placed on personal choice seemed almost too much to bear. The promise, in the eyes of pragmatist philosophers, was that if there were no a priori axioms, then the most reliable type of knowledge was knowledge that drew on and

coordinated the experiences of as many people as possible, and that in general cooperation was the best strategy for human flourishing in a radically aleatory universe. They concluded that to the limited extent that “man” had a “nature” to which politics were obliged to conform, that nature was social, and its politics were social politics.³⁷

Progressive intellectuals such as Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann (in his younger years), and John Dewey faced the awkward problem of explaining how American democracy had managed to persist, and even thrive, for over a century in the grip of ideas that they regarded as discredited. Why were the socializing effects of religion, public education, and the political process, along with the individual rights enshrined in the Constitution, not enough to safeguard democracy anymore? Croly, Lippmann, and Dewey found their answer in the closing of the Western frontier. Their vision of the frontier was mostly mythological. It differed not only from the historical consensus about that period in our own time, but also from the contemporaneous ideas of Frederick Jackson Turner, the father of frontier history. Whereas Turner highlighted the frontier's effectiveness as a melting pot, for these progressive intellectuals the frontier was a unique and unstable environment in which the untrammelled pursuit of personal wealth in the free market temporarily appeared to overlap with the social good. When the frontier finally closed, however, Americans would have to confront the gap between the two, and make a choice between them. When making a living meant developing unused land and reinvesting any capital back into further development, all using free labor, it was easy, they argued, to see why the pioneers identified the social good with private gain. Until they did, they argued, Americans would go on behaving like “economic monsters, restlessly driving hard bargains with nature and one another” without understanding that they were rending the social fabric.³⁸

As Croly puts it in *The Promise of American Life* (1909), for the pioneers “the test of American

37. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Atlantic Crossings*, passim.

38. Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008 (1920), p. 127.

national success was the comfort and prosperity of the individual; and the means to that end, – a system of unrestricted individual aggrandizement and collective irresponsibility [. . .] checked only by a system of legally constituted rights.” The frontier was partially redeemed by the loose sense of “good-fellowship” and shared endeavor that it fostered. “Closely connected with [the pioneers’] perverted ideas and their narrow view of life,” wrote Croly, was a “homogeneous social intercourse” that was “genuinely democratic in feeling. [. . .] They felt kindly towards one another and communicated freely with one another because they were not divided by radical differences of class, standards, point of view, and wealth.” Every citizen was more or less interchangeable, so society naturally cohered without individuals changing their behavior on its account, or even thinking very much about it. “The old American dream,” Lippmann writes of frontier society, was really a daydream of “drift with impunity,” of social problems somehow solving themselves while everyone went about their own business.³⁹

The closing of the frontier coincided with other major social changes that shaped American modernity: industrialization, urbanization, mass immigration, the rise of the corporation and the labor union, and a growing body of government regulations and regulators. The homogeneity of the frontier would be a thing of the past. “After 1870 or so,” according to Croly, “the pioneer farmer [. . .] bought and sold in the markets of the world. He needed more capital and more machinery. He had to borrow money and make shrewd business calculations.” In short he needed the expertise that Croly’s frontiersmen conspicuously lacked. “The jack-of-all-trades no longer possessed an important economic function,” Croly observed. “Industrial economy demanded the expert with his high and special standards of achievement. The railroads and factories could not be financed and operated without the assistance of well-paid and well-trained men, who could do one or two things well, and who did not pretend to do much of anything else.” Because these experts were specialists, they could not be merely

39. Croly, Herbert. *The Promise of American Life*. New York: Macmillan, 1909, pp. 58, 69; Lippmann, Walter. *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914, p. 179.

one of a number of fungible “good fellows” in a homogeneous society. They could only exist as “a part of a great industrial machine, and their “interests were those of a group,” the corporation. And corporations, if left to their own devices as the pioneer jack-of-all-trades had been left to his, tended to pursue monopolies and foreclose opportunities for their competitors. At that point corporate interests clearly diverged from those of the public. “Individual and social interest did substantially coincide as long as so many opportunities were open to the poor and untrained man, and as long as the public interest demanded first of all the utmost celerity of economic development,” Croly argued. “But [. . .] with the advent of economic and social maturity, the exercise of certain legal rights became substantially equivalent to the exercise of a privilege.” In practice, equality before the law was coming to mean inequality of opportunity that ran counter to “our national Promise,” which for Croly consists of “an improving popular economic condition, guaranteed by democratic political institutions, and resulting in moral and political amelioration.” The days in which “these manifold benefits were to be obtained merely by liberating the enlightened self-interest of the American people” were over, if no “preestablished harmony can [now] exist between the free and abundant satisfaction of private needs and the accomplishment of a morally and socially desirable result.” If the Promise is to survive, Croly concludes, it must become the target of deliberate social action, “a conscious national purpose instead of an inexorable national destiny.”⁴⁰

Drift and Mastery, Lippmann's 1914 manifesto for a Progressive politics, begins, like Croly's, by asking America to be more forthright and self-aware regarding its national purposes. Any democracy worthy of the name, Lippmann writes, is one in which the people's will guides public policy. Yet on the most pressing questions of the day, he notes, many people seem not to have any ideas at all. Americans are always ready to decry the government's incursions into private life, but are silent about the best

40. Croly, *Promise of American Life*, pp. 109-10, 187, 9.

ways for the government to exercise whatever powers it legitimately can on behalf of the public interest. Before empirical policy questions such as “how can the federal government lower the unemployment rate?” the public is paralyzed, and unable to stop private, self-interested actors from manipulating labor laws for their own benefit. “Without a tyrant to attack an immature democracy is always somewhat bewildered,” Lippmann writes. “Yet we have to face the fact in America that what thwarts the growth of our civilization is not the uncanny, malicious contrivance of the plutocracy, but the faltering method, the distracted soul, and the murky vision of what we call grandiloquently the will of the people.” Lippmann labels this intellectual passivity “drift,” and he believes that it has never been more prevalent than in 1914.⁴¹

Like Croly, Lippmann asserts that as the frontier period draws to a close, the economic and social ideas associated with laissez-faire have become a burden, which, thanks to the work of writers like Croly, the Progressive intelligentsia has already abandoned. “No one, unafflicted with invincible ignorance, desires to preserve our economic system in its existing form,” Lippmann declares. “We have scotched the romance of success.” With it, traditionalism in the family and the arts has also crumbled, leaving “women 'emancipated'; for what we hardly know” and “artists [. . .] somewhat stunned by the rarefied atmosphere of their freedom.” If Croly thinks that America's problem is its frontier-era intellectual straitjacket, for Lippmann it is its intellectual nakedness. “The battle for us,” he explains, “does not lie against crusted prejudice, but against the chaos of a new freedom.” While Croly asks Americans to affirm a particular formulation of their national creed, Lippmann wonders whether they can form any kind of conscious purpose at all. The modern democrat “faces an enormously complicated world, full of stirring and confusion and ferment. [. . .] He can't, however, live with any meaning unless he formulates for himself a vision of what is to come out of the unrest,” some concrete idea of the national good. He calls the power to formulate such a vision of social action “mastery,” and

41. Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, p. xvi.

urges that developing it in the public should be the overarching goal of Progressive politics.⁴²

Despite the dominance of the administrative progressives, whose vision of social action emphatically did not rest on the judgment of the public, Lippmann's call for mastery was echoed in contemporary educational circles. Ellwood P. Cubberley, the leading historian of and cheerleader for the American school in the Progressive Era (and the confusion between these two roles was significant), writes that the public school is entering a new phase in which training for “useful and efficient action” in the face of the changing conditions and character of democratic life is the primary goal of education. As we shall see, all of the educational figures from the body of this study would agree, albeit in very different ways. Yet this moment too would have its Orestes Brownsons, protesting that the individual is never empowered on her own terms, but always on the non-neutral terms of the educational profession. Henry Adams, for instance, agrees that education in the present day must mean training the mind to react to the shifting “forces that surround” it with “purpose,” “vigor[,] and economy” by “choice” instead of “haphazardly”; but Adams believes that such an education can never be found in the confines of a school, and must rather be gotten from life itself.⁴³

Progressivism's Aesthetic Education: Three Authors and Three Movements

In the main body of this study we will examine literary engagements with three progressive education movements, which, while expressive of three very different philosophical and social perspectives, share certain features common to their moment. First, all of them embrace some form of the social action ideal, although they do so in a way that only partially entrusts individuals with an equitable role in democratic deliberation. Even this partial realization of the ideal, however, distinguishes these

42. Ibid., pp. xix, xvi, xx.

43. Cubberley and Adams quoted in Cremin, Lawrence. *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1965, pp. 39-41, 33-35.

movements from the One Best System of the administrative progressives. On a pedagogical level, their divergence from the unabashed technocracy of the One Best System can be explained by the rise of the “Doctrine of Interest” in elite educational circles, beginning with the Herbartians. We will examine the Doctrine of Interest in detail in the following chapter; in brief, it turns mental discipline upside down by making the scientific claim that students only learn things that they are spontaneously inspired to investigate, rather than things that are presented as stages in an obstacle course that strengthens the will. The Doctrine thus turns the ethical commitment to individual autonomy within the educational process into a value-neutral conclusion of the science of education. The increasing prestige of the science of education itself (really of multiple scientific discourses that found homes in elite education schools), as distinct from the holistic and value-laden moral philosophy of Horace Mann, is a second trend that applies to all three movements to be examined. The third commonality among these movements is their deployment of the category of the aesthetic to illustrate that their theories of education can encompass the full range of human experience, and that therefore their visions of social action are not obstacles to the full self-realization of free individuals.

The first author/movement pairing we will consider is that of the Russian-American Yiddish/English socialist writer Abraham Cahan with the movement known as Herbartianism, or, as we will call it for the sake of clarity, American Herbartianism. As one of its very few chroniclers, Harold Dunkel, puts it, American Herbartianism, inspired by a half-forgotten founder and itself all but forgotten today, is the protagonist of an “educational ghost story.” Its core ideas were developed by Johann Friedrich Herbart, a German philosopher who died in 1841, and incubated by Herbart's disciples in European educational circles, where they were discovered in the 1880s and 1890s by American educators looking to shore up their nascent profession's intellectual bona fides. This shoring up was especially necessary as the faculty psychology on which the pedagogy of mental discipline rested lost credibility in the face of new advances in laboratory psychology, with its picture of the mind

as a tangle of stimulus-response circuits rather than an elegant hierarchy of distinct mental organs. Mental discipline, as we have seen, appealed to educators because it ostensibly both promoted moral virtue and was strictly value-neutral. In Herbart American teacher-trainers such as Charles de Garmo and the brothers Charles and Frank McMurry believed they had found a way to recreate that powerful combination of attributes in a way that was consistent with the most advanced psychological findings. (A 1906 book on American Herbartianism suggests that William James's ideas were particularly influential on the movement, and James himself uses the Herbartian term “apperception mass,” with apparent approval, in his *Talks to Teachers*.)⁴⁴

Herbart had been directly influenced by Pestalozzi, whose schools he had visited and whose pedagogy of small, carefully concatenated steps he reinterpreted as a method for constructing a shared culture rather than recovering a lost nature. Unlike Pestalozzi, Herbart was not interested in preserving the concrete reality of the natural world. His concern, rather, was with avoiding large, disjunctive intellectual leaps. According to his theory of apperception, new knowledge can only be interpreted through old knowledge, and so the new should be introduced with as much context from the old as possible. At the level of the individual lesson, Herbart proposed a method, distilled by his disciples into the formula of the “five steps,” by which new knowledge is to be integrated with old knowledge. At the level of the curriculum, the watchwords of the American Herbartians were “concentration,” the upbuilding of a central highly integrated mass of knowledge, and “correlation,” the process by which other subjects were to be approached via the central concentration. These methods for organizing knowledge were thought to produce psychological integration in the student (who would maintain a “complete circle of thought”), which would in turn be conducive to social integration as the student came to recognize the thick web of relations surrounding her. In this way the Herbartian method, like

44. Randels, George Basil. “The Doctrines of Herbart in the United States.” Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1909, pp. 29, 64. “Apperception” is the title and topic of the fourteenth chapter of James, William. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. New York: Henry Holt, 1900.

the old mental discipline, would produce morality with merely formal, value-neutral means. The specific nature of this integration was always somewhat vague: just how could one know whether a new lesson would be well-integrated with an older one? By virtue of what properties of an idea could it be diagnosed as close to or far from another? If these questions cannot be answered, what use is the method at all? Herbart himself answered them with a highly complex and idiosyncratic metaphysics in which reality is composed of monads which combine to form objects and mental states according to a magnificently abstruse “metaphysical calculus.” This calculus could never be seen in action, but the proof of its principles, for Herbart, could be found in the experience of aesthetic “perfection,” in which the ideal of the “complete circle” was fully realized. The aesthetic object thus becomes the visible proof of an invisible order around which his educational thought was organized. The American Herbartians dropped the metaphysical calculus, and in fact deployed art in a slightly different way. For them, the importance of art lay in its power to present things and ideas in any way one could imagine; it could thus be used to link new knowledge to any conceivable apperception mass. The self-evidence of aesthetic value, in turn, reflected the hunger of the perceiver's mind for such perfect links. This hunger, in general, is what the American Herbartians meant by the “interest” of the student: not so much the concretely expressed desires of real children, but their theoretical agreeableness to certain highly abstract instructional procedures. As Dewey argued in *Interest in Relation to the Will* and, later, in *Democracy and Education*, the American Herbartians thus maintained a formal fiction of student-centered education, while in fact their whole program rested on the educator's minute and total control of the smallest steps of the learning process.

As a journalist, pamphleteer, and writer of propagandistic literature, Abraham Cahan thought of himself as an educator, and his disputes with rivals within the socialist movement frequently turned on pedagogical questions. Cahan was frustrated by other socialists' (and anarchists') attempts to win converts to the cause by publishing *ex cathedra* doctrinal statements that could only interest those

already initiated into socialist thought. Accusing these writers of ignoring the latest advances in the science of education, Cahan insisted that the truths of socialism had to be carefully couched in terms that would be intelligible to the average worker within his or her existing frame of reference. In Yiddish works such as the long-running column “*Der Proletarishker Maggid*” (“The Proletarian Preacher”) and the pamphlet-novella “*Vi Azoy Rafael Na'arizokh Is Gevorn a Sozialist*” (“How Rafael Na'arizokh Became a Socialist”), he pursues a Herbartian socialist pedagogy based on the “concentration” of his Lower East Side readership's knowledge in the thick lifeworld of shtetl and neighborhood experience. His political opponents warned that by meeting his readers more than halfway, he was watering down socialist ideas and failing to win true converts, but Cahan held that it was in fact possible to lead his audience to a full-fledged socialism without casting himself as a keeper of arcane knowledge. In Cahan's English writings, however, which were published in prestigious venues and directed at intellectuals rather than workers, he wrote from the perspective of Slaughter's “*Bildung* to the second degree.” Increasingly disillusioned by the Jewish immigrant community's failure to adopt socialism, but still committed to his pedagogical methods on basic philosophical grounds, he expressed his pessimism and disappointment in short stories such as “Tzinchadzi of the Catskills,” and in his magnum opus, the 1917 anti-*Bildungsroman* *The Rise of David Levinsky*.

The next chapter traces the biographical, intellectual, and thematic intersections between Willa Cather and the nascent Montessori movement. Although Montessori schools did not become widespread in the United States until after the Second World War, Maria Montessori enjoyed a brief but intense American vogue between 1911 and 1915. Montessori emerged from the context of Italian Progressivism, which was concerned, even more directly than its American counterpart, with shaping a citizenry capable of steering a modern industrial democracy. “We have made Italy,” the slogan went; “now we must make Italians.” Montessori's approach was diametrically opposed to that of the

American administrative progressives, however. The dysfunction of the Italian government, which during the Progressive Era replaced its Minister of Education more than once a year on average, made her distrustful of complex centralized systems. Working through a network of private patrons, Montessori instead developed an educational idea that was, pedagogically and administratively, extremely simple, while still, from her perspective at least, taking advantage of the latest advances in the science of education. She did indeed make at least one spectacular and empirically verifiable pedagogical advance: the majority of her students in her first school, all of whom came from disadvantaged households, were able to read by age five.

Montessori's idea of social action is, paradoxically, almost libertarian. She believes that human nature is inherently social, but, unlike Herbart or William Torrey Harris, she does not see its social side as something that must be built up; rather, it can be expected to grow or flow (plants and canals are her favored educational metaphors) from any self that has not been distorted by the imposition of others' materialistic agendas. (In this she echoes the Rousseau of *Emile*, a text that looms large in her thinking). Montessori has a belief, equal parts scientific and religious, in a force called *horme* that permeates all things and directs them in their proper course of growth. *Horme* naturally steers human beings toward the activities that will lead both to their own flourishing and to the knitting together of a community, and eventually a society. The task of education, then, is not to direct the child, but to surround her untarnished hormic energy with protective walls, and to provide it with the materials it will need while strictly refraining from telling the students almost anything beyond the names of things. While *horme* is a mysterious energy, the conditions under which it flourishes can, Montessori believes, be placed on a strictly scientific footing. The center of the Montessori classroom is not rows of desks where students transcribe teachers' remarks – indeed the Montessori classroom had no such desks – but rather a set of custom-designed physical objects, the “didactic apparatus,” which is meant to create just the situations that children of certain ages need in order to perform the fixed set of exercises by which

horme unfolds. In Montessori's aesthetics, meanwhile, the art object appears as a glorified piece of the didactic apparatus, an "iridescent shell" into which *horme* can grow higher than ever, and which can reveal the nature of *horme* to students of art in the same way that an empty shell can reveal the nature of its long-dead occupant to a paleontologist. By fleshing out the outlines of humanity's hormic endowment, art thus helps the educator fine-tune her own didactic apparatus.

For Montessori, technocratic control of the classroom environment combines with libertarianism in teacher/student interactions to produce, theoretically, a spontaneously social self. This blend of science, efficiency (Montessori's schools were extremely cheap to operate), libertarianism, Romantic reverence for childhood innocence, and opposition to the school's entanglement with government and business captured the imagination of many Americans following educational debates but unaffiliated with the educational profession itself; Alexander Graham Bell and his wife Mabel Gardiner Hubbard, rather than professional educators, were at the center of an amateur movement to open Montessori schools in the United States. Indeed, the religious basis of Montessori's scientific ideas, combined with her personal drive for total control of her schools and their affiliated teacher-training programs, prevented her from fully engaging with the educational profession and its scientific standards. Rather than being absorbed by the US educational profession, which turned away from her in any case, she built her own independent institutional base.

Montessori crossed Cather's path at a crucial point in her literary development. There is a decisive break in Cather's career between her apprentice phase, which culminates in *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), a "chatty" society novel about an architect, and the mature style inaugurated in *O Pioneers!* (1913), characterized by laconic, imagistic prose and thematically concerned with what she would later call "unfurnished" spaces in landscape and psychology. This break coincided with the grand tour of America on which Cather's employer, S.S. McClure of *McClure's Magazine*, conducted the Italian educator. As McClure discusses in his autobiography, which was in fact ghostwritten by Cather herself,

he took a leading role in explaining and promoting Montessori to an American audience, and he was enthusiastic about her ideas. Cather, it seems, was influenced by Montessori's philosophy of silence, concreteness, and receptivity (rather than, say, the elaborate verbal triangulations of the Herbartians); however, these ideas did not mean the same thing to Cather as they did to Montessori. The human energies that Cather depicts as being released by Montessori methods prove to be inherently excessive and unstable, sources of tragedy rather than natural balance. Cather's relationship to Montessori, then, is also one of “*Bildung* to the second degree,” an alternately “wry or penseroso” irony about the results of a method toward which she nonetheless feels drawn.

The subsequent chapter, on Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the movement for social efficiency education, offers a closer look at a subset of the administrative progressives who argued that the one best system advanced not just aggregate aims but individual self-realization and even aesthetic appreciation. This movement, a loose grouping including Edward A. Ross, David Snedden, and Franklin Bobbitt, contained a variety of voices, and this chapter will focus only on those that point, however awkwardly, in the direction of a *Bildung* idea. The *Bildung* idea that emerges, especially from Bobbitt, identifies personal growth with the situating of the self in ever larger and more informationally complete contexts; the path of its growth ascends through domestic, local, regional, national, and global communities, be they political, economic, or whatever. The distinctive role of the arts, for Bobbitt, is to make information easier to assimilate, bridging the gap between bare facts and the perceptual sensibilities of the human mind. The self thus realized, however, does not become more well-rounded or complete in itself – indeed, as one contemporary critic charged, social efficiency education lacks any concept of “the mind as a unity” – but more narrowly specialized and more beholden to the technicians who alone are able to process the vast quantities of information needed to coordinate the activities of a large group. For Gilman, a friend of Ross's, and a theorist of social efficiency education in her own

right, this erasure of what she calls "personality" is itself a great psychological insight. Gilman imagines the social efficiency curriculum as the antidote to the type of neurasthenic introspection that Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure only exacerbated. The educational thought that she explicitly formulates in nonfiction such as *Women and Economics*, *Social Ethics*, *Concerning Children*, and *Our Brains and What Ails Them* defines an upward path from the maddening individuality of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" through progressively saner, happier, and more technocratic arrangements that develop over the course of *Benigna Machiavelli*, *What Diantha Did*, *Moving the Mountain*, and *Herland*. Rather than using literature to express an ambivalent relationship with the educational theory that engrossed her, Gilman, always perhaps more an intellectual than an artist at heart, sets out to correct its flaws so that ultimately no such ambivalence should be called for.

Pragmatism's Aesthetic Education

The reimagination of aesthetic education as means to social action is most fully realized in the work of John Dewey, for whom art directs us toward pleasant qualities that are best realized, outside of the artwork, in the experience of equitable collaboration among pluralistic individuals with their own interests. In terms of their philosophies, the difference between Dewey and these other educationists can be boiled down to their beliefs about the limits of scientific knowledge. None of these other figures shares Dewey's pragmatist insistence on these limits. Each of them takes some one science (mathematics or logic for the Herbartians, biology for Montessori, and sociology for the social efficiency educators) as adequate grounds for establishing a goal of education, and a method to reach it. Dewey, on the other hand, sees all sciences as useful for educators, but argues that goals and methods must ultimately derive from the direct experience of education itself, with its irreducibly qualitative elements.

Dewey's thinking about the irreducibly qualitative dimensions of experience has been well summarized by Victor Kestenbaum as the “primacy of meaning” thesis, which rests on Dewey's distinction between “primary” and “reflective” experience. Dewey argues (most thoroughly in *Experience and Nature*) that while knowledge emerges from experience, it always emerges by collapsing some of the dimensions of experience. “Primary” experience involves the “doings and undergoings” of an embodied mind that reacts emotionally to events which either help or hinder its ability to feel at home in the world. (Physical survival is the basic requirement for feeling at home in the world, but there is no upper bound to the further refinements that can be added to one's sense of at-homeness.) When we experience something, our immediate reaction is not one that involves knowledge or information, but an emotional response, a cringe, smile, or other expression that in some sense involves our whole body – not just the patterns of neural activity in our brains, but our whole physical organism as it interfaces with its environment. While these reactions are extremely subtle, they are simple in the sense that they are just a single felt quality; they just are what they are. They are the “meaning” of an experience in its primary sense. In “reflective” experience, primary experience is filtered through various humanly constructed regimes of knowledge, be they scientific, mathematical, logical, or whatever. In purely reflective experience, whatever is not caught by these filters is eliminated. Thus, according to the primacy of meaning thesis, all intellectual knowledge grows out of and to some extent truncates the meanings found in primary experience. The meanings of primary experience, however, are where we ultimately live, where things matter to us. In Dewey's account, art is one of the techniques that humanity has developed to explore and communicate the meanings of primary experience.⁴⁵

Dewey's educational philosophy is oriented toward a certain kind of socially participatory

45. Kestenbaum, Victor. *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning*. New York: Humanities Press, 1977; Kestenbaum, Victor. *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

experience, which is also distinguished by its being, at the same time, an experience of expansion and revitalization within the individual. Scattered across Dewey's massive body of work are descriptions of some of the qualities that define such experiences, which are found in personal life, social life, the life of the school, and, especially, in aesthetic experience, where they are thrown into sharpest relief. In the chapter on Dewey we will discuss four such qualities, which Dewey calls interest, purpose, meaning, and freedom (or integrity). The pursuit of these qualities, like Schiller's pursuit of the play drive, places art at the center of a project of reconciling the free democratic individual and the stability of the social order. This list of four qualities is intended to be incomplete, and can never be completed; unlike Schiller, Dewey does not rely on a taxonomy of psychological faculties, and insists on leaving human nature open-ended. He does, crucially, maintain an ideal of individual and social integrity, or harmony, but refrains from specifying the components to be integrated or the shapes that this (perpetual, unending) integration might take.

The qualities of educational or integrative experience are, in Dewey's system, most clearly present in aesthetic experience, which gives aesthetic experience much the same function it has for Schiller. Unlike Schiller's aesthetic experience, however, Dewey's is composed of elements whose significance remains radically open. Rather than converging on an already fixed moral law (as Schiller's *Bildung* converges on Kantian ethics), the social and personal applications of Dewey's qualities of aesthetic experience always leave room for reinterpretation based on pluralistic deliberation, which he in turn makes central to his pedagogy and politics. Furthermore, the aesthetic standing of all artworks remains open to reevaluation as both individuals and society update their understanding of the ideal of "maturer experience" toward which Dewey's education is oriented. Art thus acts as the "growing edge" of individual and cultural sensibilities while nonetheless remaining accessible only through the lens of those sensibilities; it helps us undergo "growth" or "progress," individually or socially, but in ways that are limited (though not totally determined) by our sense of what those eminently contestable terms

might mean.

This notion of Deweyan *Bildung* obviously conflicts with the pragmatist aesthetics of Richard Rorty and Richard Poirier, reading, as it does, past “final vocabularies” and the “struggle for verbal consciousness” and into what passes for the metaphysical grounds of pragmatist experience, where it mingles with ethical, political, and psychological considerations. On this reading of Dewey, in the movement outside of socially given language that Poirier describes as the “point of incandescence” one finds not just personal renewal but the values that characterize educational experience and sustain social life; Rortian “vocabularies” are not just collected and compared, but subjected to what Victor Kestenbaum calls “the severity and the grace of [an] ideal” that takes in the whole of lived experience, including its social side. This conflict with Rorty and Poirier, two of pragmatism’s ablest interpreters, is not one to be taken lightly. On the other hand, it is not one that need be undertaken alone, as a growing body of scholarship has already begun tracing the robustly social and ethical side of Dewey’s aesthetics, as in the work of Thomas M. Alexander, Richard J. Bernstein, Maxine Greene, Philip W. Jackson, Victor Kestenbaum, Scott Stroud, and Robert Westbrook. As the presence of Greene and Jackson suggests, I see the idea of Deweyan *Bildung* as engaging with the Dewey who continues to serve as the lodestar of American education schools, where (as I have been arguing throughout this introduction) the logic of educational professionalism demands what Westbrook calls a “metaphysics of democratic community.” One need not believe, even as a good pragmatist, that educational professionalism is necessary or even good; but if one does believe in it, then Dewey’s *Bildung* may describe the maximum depth and breadth of importance that it can assign to the arts, and with Maxine Greene we can, as good Deweyans, “make aesthetic experience our pedagogic creed.”⁴⁶

46. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.; Poirier, *Renewal of Literature*; Alexander, Thomas M. *John Dewey’s Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987; Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*; Greene, Maxine. *Releasing the Imagination*. New York: Wiley, 2000(quotations from p. 133); Greene, Maxine. *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988; Jackson, Philip W. *John Dewey and the*

In addition to the objections that a Rorty or a Poirier might raise, Dewey's communitarianism has struck critical education historians such as Clarence Karier, Michael Katz, Joel Spring, and Charles Glenn as conformist and repressive. To revive the “common faith” theme, they cast him as too much the grand inquisitor of a church of the “good mixer.” This characterization is one-sided, and overlooks the role of dissent in Dewey's thought. Glenn accuses Dewey of making a fetish of “cultural participation,” but Dewey's notion of such participation entails reform, not just passive alignment with the status quo. Nevertheless, however consistently non-repressive Dewey's idea of education may be in theory, its adherents would be foolish to deny that the slipperiness of the concepts of “growth,” “educational experience,” “maturer experience,” and the like, which define the authority of the educational profession for him, makes it just as vulnerable to Redfield's paradoxical logic of “exemplarity,” which opens education to “the ruses of capital” and other forms of power, as Schiller's equally slippery regulatory ideal of “beautiful moral freedom.” To prevent the autonomy of the educational profession from lapsing into the hermetic self-dealing of the “interlocking directorate” (Arthur Bestor's pejorative term for the floating world of educational institutions) requires constant vigilance, directed at both the profession and the observer's own values and interpretations of reality.⁴⁷

Such efforts of vigilance are not at all guaranteed to succeed, and one might justly conclude that the likely harms of a Deweyan educational professionalism gone wrong outweigh the likely goods of such a professionalism gone right. One might instead prefer an educational professionalism that avows no expertise that is not based on empirical science, which could mean either a strictly value-neutral educational system (which is of course impossible in practice, so better to say a system whose values are strictly hidden) or one in which schooling becomes wholly privatized (and either supported by

Lessons of Art. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000; Kestenbaum, *Grace and Severity of the Ideal*; Stroud, Scott. *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality*. State College, PA: Penn State Press, 2012; Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (quotation from p. 361).

47. Bestor, Arthur, ed. *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985 (1953).

vouchers or simply unsubsidized), in which case educators would be free to hew to whatever values they wish. (The latter, with voucher support, is Glenn's proposal.) Or (joining Joel Spring) one might reject schooling itself, following the “unschooling” path of John Holt and Ivan Illich. These alternatives simply abandon the Progressive aspiration to deliberately craft a pluralistic democracy capable of coordinated action in the face of anti-democratic forces, particularly the plutocracy that thrives under Lippmannian “drift.” As Stanley Fish might argue, even as good pragmatists we are not bound to that aspiration, nor to any social aspirations at all. Even within a Deweyan epistemology, we might just as well concede that we are destined to live in what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the “inoperative community,” in which social action so called is always an ideological pose. Or, with Bill Readings, we might locate ourselves in a “community of dissensus,” in which we perpetually rethink the terms on which community might be thought, but never pursue any of these terms in a programmatic way. If, however, as educators we are committed to the ideal of pluralistic social action, we would do best to embrace the Dewey of the education schools, and, as teachers of and advocates for the arts, to embrace the *Bildung* idea at this Dewey's core.⁴⁸

Throughout this Introduction, I have both insisted on the viability of the Deweyan form of aesthetic education and acknowledged strong objections to it, as well as to the general concept of *Bildung*. Many of these objections raise the same problem: how can we ensure that an institution as unaccountable, and as potentially invasive, as the educational profession will not be abused, as it certainly has been often enough? It must be frankly admitted that we can never ensure this. If, then, we wish to completely protect students from the insolence of educational office, we must join the objectors. Nonetheless, there are two powerful reasons not to do so.

48. Glenn, *American Model of State and School*; Spring, Joel. “Deschooling as Social Revolution.” *Roots of Crisis*, Karier, Spring, and Violas, eds.; Holt, John. *How Children Fail*. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 1995 (1964); Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. London: Marion Boyars, 1971; Fish, “Truth and Toilets”; Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; Readings, Bill. *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996.

The first reason is that, in radical critiques of the American education system, “the *problem* of social existence is overlooked,” as Maxine Greene writes, “along with the inescapability of relationship for those who must learn to be human in a not always sustaining world.” Joel Spring, for instance, grounds his thinking in opposition to “the existence of the state in any form because it destroys individual autonomy.” In Spring, Karier, and like-minded critics, one finds a good deal of keen observation, but also (again quoting Greene) a “strange, innocent optimism that leads to setting aside the problem of socialization” in favor of maximal liberty for the lone person. Greene compares this attitude, loosely but with justice, to the asocial individualism of Quentin Anderson's “imperial selves.” (It also resembles the Foucauldian criticisms of the German *Bildung* idea discussed earlier in this Introduction.) As analysts of the educational scene, such critics are frequently insightful, but the alternatives they suggest are hardly more viable or appealing than the present system, imperfect as it is. Is, say, the “free-range child” of John Holt's unschooling philosophy really better off, on average, than the public school student? As Dewey says, “it may be a loss rather than a gain to escape from the control of another person only to find one's conduct dictated by immediate whim and caprice.” Recognizing that, with all its imperfections, the inheritance of the common school may still be preferable to other alternatives, Greene calls for “a more complex, a 'darker' approach.” “The tension between individual and civilization has been and will be irreducible,” she goes on. “Education, because it takes place at the intersection where the demands for social order and the demands for autonomy conflict, must proceed through and by means of this tension.” To the utopian imagination in which the irrepressible self is thought to be capable of escaping this tension, Dewey's educational ideas may seem exceedingly conformist. To the imagination that embraces this tension as a basic fact of social existence, however, Dewey may make the best of the world as it really is.⁴⁹

49. Greene, Maxine. “Identities and Contours: An Approach to Educational History.” *History, Education, and Public Policy*. Ed. Donald R. Warren. Berkeley: McCutchan, 1978; Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone, 1997 (1938), pp. 55-56.

If this first reason embraces tension and darkness at the expense of “innocent optimism,” the second reason does the opposite. This second reason is simple hope. The most audacious assumption of Dewey's idea of aesthetic education is that in a democracy it is possible to live thoroughly *with* others in a way that also allows us to live with ourselves, to maintain individual integrity even as we pursue social integrity. Everywhere we look, however, we see that this double integrity is not, and never has been, realized. For Dewey, nonetheless, this is no cause for despair. “The idea of the whole,” he writes, “whether the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea. The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes [a whole] only through imaginative extension. [...] Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification.” Dewey's vision of interlocking psychological, social, and aesthetic integrities, that is, is and must remain an object of faith, available only to those with a will to believe in it, though no less plausible for that. Ultimately, then, William James's words about his own melioristic faith describe my attitude toward Dewey's aesthetic education: “I can not speak officially as a pragmatist here; all I can say is that my own pragmatism offers no objection to my taking sides with this more moralistic view.”⁵⁰

50. Dewey quoted in Kestenbaum, *Grace and Severity of the Ideal*, p. 180; James, William. “Pragmatism and Religion.” *Writings, 1902-1910*. New York: Library of America, 1988.

Abraham Cahan and the American Herbartians: Bending Down to Pick Up the Child

This chapter develops an extended comparison between Abraham Cahan, the Russian-American, Yiddish-English activist-journalist-novelist and Herbartianism, a transatlantic education movement, originating in Prussia, to which American educational professionals looked for scientific grounding beginning in the 1880s. Unlike those explored in the following two chapters, this comparison between a literary writer and an educational theory does not rest on a verifiable biographical connection, nor even on positive proof that Cahan was familiar with Herbartian writings. (Such proof may exist, but, as a slow reader of Yiddish and a non-reader of Russian, two languages in which Cahan read voraciously, I cannot hope to find it myself.) The bases of the Cahan/Herbartianism connection, rather, are, first, the fact that Cahan shows an awareness of contemporary debates about educational theory, especially in the section of his memoirs devoted to his own schooling, and Herbartianism figures prominently in those debates; and, second, that many of the central concerns of Cahan's career mirror those of Herbartianism.

As Jules Chametzky notes in his fine study of Cahan, in much of his writing Cahan casts himself as a native guide, translating ideas and sensibilities from one language to another, in ways both literal and figurative. Cahan explains American customs to immigrant Jews, Jewish customs to American gentiles, the intellectual world to the uneducated, the workaday world to the intellectuals, and socialism to everybody. In all of these roles, he is careful, sometimes to the point of being patronizing, to couch his ideas in terms that have a concrete, lived significance for his audience. In terms of the pedagogical debates of his time, Cahan is preoccupied with the problem that John Dewey calls that of “the child and the curriculum”: how to make a body of knowledge meaningful in terms of the learner's existing interests and projects. Traditional pedagogy, based on rote memorization and recitation, fails to address this question, as Cahan observes at length in the school section of his memoirs. While Dewey calls for

students to find their own paths through the curriculum in ways that might shed new light on it for the teacher, however, the Herbartian approach to this problem, an approach shared by Cahan, is to insist on the fixity of the curriculum and use sophisticated pedagogical techniques to ensure that learners starting with various idiosyncratic perspectives are seamlessly guided to it. This method combined a solicitous attention to the learners' perspective with an underlying refusal to treat that perspective as intellectually significant. As John Dewey observes, "The philosophy [of Herbartianism] is eloquent about the duty of the teacher in instructing pupils; it is almost silent regarding his privilege of learning."⁵¹ Such a method can only work if the teacher is fully justified in his certainty about the material being taught; if he is not, if the learners have valid differences of belief, then the Herbartian teacher is at an impasse.

That Cahan felt himself to be at some such impasse, and increasingly so over time, is another major theme of his career. As many Cahan scholars have noted, he gives his pessimism and frustration its fullest articulation in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which can be read as a brutal self-portrait of Cahan's worst qualities. David Engel observes that "Levinsky's exaggerated conformity," his need to tailor himself (as it were) to his circumstances, leads to a "failure of wholeness" that "creates the disturbing impression of Levinsky as a man somehow absent from his own life, self-estranged."⁵² Chametzky identifies a similar discrepancy (a word that Engel notes "must occur two-dozen times in the novel") between the outer and inner facing elements of Levinsky's character, "a dissociation between thought and experience and between emotional reality and language," a "difficulty [...] meaningfully getting the diverse parts of his life together."⁵³ Irving Howe gives this vein of *Levinsky* analysis its keenest articulation:

51. Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004, p. 55.

52. Engel, David. "The 'Discrepancies' of the Modern: Towards a Reevaluation of Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2 (1984), 36-60, pp. 43, 37.

53. Chametzky, Jules. *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1977, p. 140.

A film of irritation coats the events of *The Rise of David Levinsky*; it is an irritation that encompasses Cahan's life as well. Perhaps it is the irritation of a public figure who has resigned himself to the costs of his character and, with a deep unspoken certainty, knows that everything for which he strains, the achievement of his whole life, must end in ashes. His private self makes demands in behalf of ease, grace, and escape which his culture cannot satisfy; his public role traps him in an imperiousness of tone and repression of self which weary him all the more. Only in the theme of unfulfillment does his literary gift fulfill itself, yet all his life that gift is haunted by a foreboding of unfulfillment.⁵⁴

How similar Howe's description sounds to the predicament of the Herbartian teacher, duty bound to express his ideas in the terms set by his intellectual charges, but never permitting himself to either truly entertain those charges' point of view nor to fully articulate his own on his own terms! We need not claim that Cahan's pedagogical commitments are the primary cause of this irritation; as Howe argues, something in Cahan's character seems to have been bent in that direction all along. At the least, however, his Herbartianism perfectly complements his temperament.

Abraham Cahan was born in 1860 in a small village outside of Vilna, in what was then the Russian empire. Cahan's extended family was fairly prosperous, and his paternal grandfather was a respected rabbi. His father, however, was a depressive man who scraped by as a *melamed*, a teacher of young children. The Cahan family moved to Vilna when Cahan was six years old, so that his father could help manage a tavern owned by some of his relatives. Cahan would loiter in the tavern and sometimes meet travelers and other odd characters. One is tempted to call the move to Vilna the first step of a long voyage away from the relative stasis of *shtetl* life and toward secularism and cosmopolitanism. Vilna was a regional center of the *haskala*, the Jewish response to the Enlightenment. The city's wealthier Jews were trying, fitfully and ambivalently, to enter the Russian middle class, and they convinced the Tsarist government to open a Jewish high school, the Vilna Teacher Training Institute (VTTI), where

54. Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976, p. 527.

their children could learn “gentile” subjects such as geography, natural science, and history. Graduates of this school were expected to become teachers in state-run grammar schools for Jewish children. When Cahan enrolled at the VTTI, his father feared that he would lose his Judaism there; he did not, but his gentile education did set him on a path that would lead away from the *shtetl*, and ultimately away from Orthodoxy.⁵⁵

At the same time, the gentile intellectual world was beginning to impinge on the Jewish one in another way: young, educated Jews were discovering the clandestine world of socialism and anarchism, which provided the broadened horizons that so many of them craved without cooperating with the Tsar. Cahan got his real education from his loose involvement with a secret network of political radicals who secretly printed, pirated, and discussed censored reading material. Cahan was particularly influenced by the newspaper of *Narodnaya Volya* (The People's Will), a self-proclaimed terrorist group that had assassinated Alexander II, and by *What Is to Be Done?*, the exiled radical Nikolai Chernishevsky's quasi-mystical allegory of social and sexual revolution. Upon graduation from the VTTI, Cahan took a teaching post in a Ukrainian village of Hasidic Jews (whom Cahan thought bigoted and superstitious); there his apartment was searched by the secret police and his cache of forbidden reading was almost discovered. Following this near-miss, which could have resulted in Siberian exile, Cahan arranged to have himself smuggled over the Austrian border, and from there he fled to America.

Cahan was a larger-than-life figure in Manhattan's Jewish Lower East Side, from his arrival there in 1882, in which year he gave the first Socialist lecture in Yiddish on American soil, until a stroke ended his career in 1946. He was heavily involved in the Jewish labor movement, helping organize

55. Biographical details throughout this chapter are drawn primarily from Cahan, Abraham. *The Education of Abraham Cahan*. Trans. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969. They are also informed by Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*; Marovitz, Sanford. *Abraham Cahan*. New York: Twayne, 1996; Pollock, Theodore Marvin. “The Solitary Clarinetist: A Critical Biography of Abraham Cahan, 1860-1917.” Diss. Columbia Univ., 1959.; Rischin, Moses. *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962; and Sanders, Ronald. *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation*. New York: Dover Publications, 1969.

America's first Jewish labor union (1884); editing or contributing to many Yiddish and English socialist newspapers including *Di Neie Tzeit* (“The New Era”), *The Workmen's Advocate*, the *Arbeiter Tzeitung* (“Workman's Paper”), *Di Tsukunft* (“The Future”), and the *Jewish Daily Forward*; rallying socialists around the mayoral candidacy of Henry George (1886); attending the Second Congress of the Second Socialist International (1891); helping arbitrate a major strike (1913); and co-founding the American Labor Party (1936).

Of all Cahan's roles, the most prominent was the lion of the *Forward*, which he ran with something of an iron fist from 1897 until 1946 (except for two short periods in which he lost control of the paper for political reasons). At the *Forward*, Cahan was known not only for his editorials and reporting, but also for his Yiddish translations of European literature, his popularizations of science and history, and for his creation, in 1906, of the *Bintel Brief* (“Bundle of Letters”), a Dear Abby feature that still runs in the *Forward* today (though it retains the title *Bintel Brief* only in the *Forward's* Russian edition). Cahan also spent the years 1897-1901 on the staff of the *Commercial Advertiser*, writing human-interest stories under the muckraker Lincoln Steffens that brought him into close contact with policemen, Tammany pols, and other elements of a gentile New York that remained opaque to his Lower East Side colleagues. After his *Advertiser* period he was uniquely qualified to interpret America to the Jews, and at the same time he became perhaps the leading interpreter of the Jews to America. At the *Advertiser* and other English organs such as the *New York Sun and Press*, Cahan published local-color sketches of Lower East Side life, among the only such sketches written from an insider's perspective. Cahan also wrote literary criticism and fiction, including the three works that have shown staying power on American literature syllabi: *Yekl* (1896), a novella about the deracination of a sweatshop worker, “The Imported Bridegroom” (1898), a short story about the secularization of a young Talmudist, and his magnum opus *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), a long novel about the success and unhappiness of a cloak-and-suit mogul.

In each of his many roles Cahan described himself as an educator, and he regarded art as central to his pedagogical method. As Moses Rischin puts it, for Cahan "literature, the new journalism, and the battle for the good society were all inseparable from the quest for 'truth in life and letters.'"⁵⁶ His overriding goal was to advance socialism among American Jews, although his definition of "socialism" became more and more diffuse over the years. In literature he considered himself an heir to the Russian realists, chiefly Tolstoy and Turgenev, and shared their belief that by revealing unvarying underlying truths about human nature and society in a narrative form that was accessible to all, literature could promote justice. In journalism he wanted socialists to turn away from abstruse dogmatic propaganda that was intelligible only to a small handful of intellectuals and to embrace a plain Yiddish style and a down-to-earth, example-based socialist pedagogy. He urged socialist journalists to portray interesting daily events in ways that suggested radical responses. In activism he scorned the obsession with doctrinal purity that led various factions of the Lower East Side left to form competing, and hence ineffective, unions in the same trades, arguing that it was better for unions to allow for pluralism within the socialist ideal in order to convert a wide variety of workers to the cause. In all of these fields Cahan saw himself holding a middle ground between, on one side, an doctrinal purism that was either unintelligible or unattractive to the average Jewish worker, and on the other, attention-seeking tactics that failed to uplift the audience they captured. Cahan wanted to attract attention and channel it in the direction of the true and the good.

Cahan and Realism: "A Work of Art Must Also Be a Work of Education"

Cahan's literary tastes were formed in the Russian leftist underground, but in later years he did not believe that the literature written by and for the underground was a good model for politically effective

56. Rischin, Moses. Introduction. *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan*. By Abraham Cahan. Ed. Rischin. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. xxxix.

writing. Instead, he admired writers who managed to sneak things by the censors, encouraging social reform while avoiding direct ideological statements. The theory of literary realism that Cahan worked out during the 1880s and 1890s was largely intended to give this admiration a sound intellectual basis.

In the late 1880s Cahan went through a Herbert Spencer phase; he rejected the aspects of Spencer that tended toward social Darwinism, but he was taken by Spencer's method of explaining social life by invoking ironclad scientific laws. Like many socialists of his generation, Cahan was fascinated by “the broadly philosophical question of the relationship between the social reality and the material nature of things,” and was “convinced that patient inquiry would discover a key to social behavior that applied equally to ants, primitive societies, and the chaotic sophistication of life in a city like New York”⁵⁷ He planned to write a grand synthesis of Darwin and Marx, showing that the laws of evolution led irresistibly to socialism. Although this project never got off the ground, Cahan remained true to its spirit. In 1894, under Cahan's editorship, the socialist monthly *Di Tsukunft* declared its inaugural issue that “the workman must know more than how he is oppressed economically and swindled politically [...] He must also understand how mankind attained its present level, how it lived earlier and how it developed. We want him to understand Darwin's teachings about the struggle for existence equally with Karl Marx's theory of surplus value.”⁵⁸ As one Cahan biographer writes, *Di Tsukunft* was animated by “the sincere belief that socialism as a form of government represented the ineluctable laws of society as surely as the descent of man represented those of biology and the paths of the suns and stars represented those of astronomy was the strongest bulwark in the Marxian defense.”⁵⁹

One reason for Cahan's insistence on the connection between Darwin and Marx was that he was anxious to establish that socialism was not a matter of opinion but a matter of fact, and propaganda not

57. Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 180.

58. Rischin, *Promised City*, p. 152.

59. Pollock, *Solitary Clarinetist*, p. 160.

a kind of persuasion but a kind of news. In 1904, a scholar named Hayim Zhitlovsky gave a series of lectures on “Marxism and Synthetic Monism,” in which he argued that Marxism contained unresolvable philosophical contradictions. The Yiddish socialists in the audience were alarmed at Zhitlovsky's criticism of Marxism but lacked the philosophical sophistication to answer his arguments. They sent Cahan to the platform to rebut him. According to one witness, Cahan “declared that Marx was not a philosopher at all, but rather an analyst of society, and that the claim for Marxism as science rested on its economic analysis of capitalism.” He denied that Marxism made anything that could be called “philosophical claims,” and was therefore incapable of philosophical self-contradiction.⁶⁰ It rested, like science itself in Cahan's baldly positivist understanding, on sensory evidence that was ultimately self-explanatory.

In his literary career Cahan extended this argument and claimed that the best way for a writer to advance socialism was not to make philosophical claims, or normative claims of any kind for that matter, but rather to help people see the world in front of their noses more clearly. In “Realism,” an essay that appeared in *The Workmen's Advocate* in 1889, Cahan attempts a full theoretical account of this idea. When an object is perceived, Cahan posits, it is not simply present to consciousness. Instead, the mind constructs an inner image of the object. Imitations (in his essay, the example is realistic paintings) work by evoking inner images that are experienced as identical to real sensation. The mind's response to a successful imitation is “the thrill of truth,” the feeling of recognizing a valid sensation in the absence of the object that normally produces that sensation. The thrill of truth is a pleasure response that the mind has acquired through evolution; when imitation is successful, one cannot help but feel it. Thus, as Cahan put it in a summary of the “Realism” essay in his autobiography *Bleter fun Mayn Leben (Leaves from My Life)*, “the power of realistic art arises from the pleasure we derive from recognizing the truth as it is mirrored by art [...] it is truth we admire and that is the source of aesthetic

60. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 241.

enjoyment.” Cahan, in other words, wanted to do to aesthetics what he would later do to Marx in the exchange with Zhitlovsky: to remove it from philosophy, where it might be debated endlessly, and attach it to science, where one was, as Cahan saw it, either right or wrong. Others might profess to receive aesthetic pleasure from stories about characters who were too noble to be real, or from the resolution of an implausible plot, but Cahan would tell such people that they must be deceiving themselves, because true aesthetic pleasure is as objectively determined as anything in the physical world. Perhaps the most important implication of Cahan's scientific aesthetics is that all good art, no matter who produces it, adds to the world's stock of truth. Since truth always springs from and points back to the universal laws described by Darwin and Marx, all good art, in some small way at least, propagates socialism, and all realists are functionally socialists whether or not they accept the label. “It is truth that we admire and that is the source of our artistic delight,” Cahan writes; “But capitalist critics don't want the truth. It disturbs the class they serve.”⁶¹

Artists who do consciously embrace socialism, therefore, need not make explicit arguments for it; indeed, these would only be distractions from the real work that art could do for the cause. (Cahan singles out William Dean Howells as a good realist who does not identify as a socialist, but whose work should be wholeheartedly embraced by socialists; as Roland Sanders says, Cahan must have been gratified when, many years after the publication of “Realism,” Howells declared that he had become a socialist.) In “The Younger Russian Writers,” an 1889 essay, Cahan explains the centrality of indirect propaganda in Russian literary scene. Russian literature, according to Cahan, benefits from an unusual political situation that forces it to develop the kind of realism of which he approves: it has both an enlightened (albeit small) reading public and a strict censor prohibiting direct political expression. Thus, Cahan explains, “silenced by the censor, the reformer is forced to call upon the novel to convey his message. This is the characteristic feature of Russian letters.” The message that all of the great

61. Cahan, *Education of Abraham Cahan*, p. 405.

Russian writers are trying to convey, according to Cahan, is the inhumanity of the Tsarist system. This is a simple truth, for Cahan, that should be obvious to anyone who knew the facts about human nature and economic relations. In Russia, therefore, the “essential point” in aesthetics is that “a work of art must also be a work of education.” “‘Art for art's sake’ is out of the question in a country where the poem must take the place of the editorial, and where the story-teller, who does not make his fiction a criticism of life, is looked upon as something like a public officer who betrays his trust,” Cahan reports. Cahan admits that “a literary creed such as this would seem to be fatal to art, and the fiction based upon it doomed to degenerate into that species of sermon-novel which is a bad sermon and a worse novel.” “Sermonizing,” however, “is just what the censor will not allow,” so “the novelist must try to make his pictures talk, to let life expose its own wounds. For, like those well-bred ladies of whom Thackeray tells us that they did not mind looking at the trousers of hundreds of men, though they would have been shocked to hear the word uttered, the censor, as a rule, does not prevent a subject of the Czar from painting a spade, but he will not let him call it by its name.” The result of all this is a literary practice that conforms to the idea that, in the words Nikolai Dobrolyubov, a Russian critic whom Cahan cites approvingly, “A work of art may be the exponent of an idea, not because the author conceives this idea upon addressing himself to his task, but because he has been struck by *those facts of life from which the idea follows as a natural inference*” (emphasis mine).⁶²

Art, in other words, can effectively educate without sermonizing because this “natural inference” was predictable. If a fact is always the example of exactly one idea, then one simply has to bring the fact before the eyes of one's audience and they can be counted upon to grasp the idea. Therefore “lifelikeness clothed in the simplest forms of expression” is “the *sine qua non* of literature.”⁶³ Even a writer like Chekov, who claims to have no political ideas but is a master of realistic observation, is

62. Cahan, Abraham. “The Younger Russian Writers.” *The Forum*. September 1899: 119-128.

63. Ibid.

embraced by Russian reformers, while Ignati Nicolayevitch Potapenko, a more overtly radical writer who often gives readers the sense of fudging the details of his stories in order to advance his ideas, is seen as a less valuable ally. Cahan's faith in a predictable inferential process, which belongs to his larger faith in such predictable processes in psychological and cultural matters, was, as we shall see, shared by Herbartians. Both Cahan and the Herbartians were thus out of step with the pragmatist revolution in American thought. Charles Peirce, for example, had argued that even the most apparently reliable scientific observations were somewhat imprecise, and that generalizations based on such observations would always be probabilistic (though he hoped that over time observations would continue to become more precise, reducing without ever eliminating uncertainty). For pragmatists, both the mind and the universe were always capable of novelty, and people could never be expected to follow the same path of "natural inference" from fact A to conclusion B. It is a little ironic, then, that Cahan's conviction that socialism is a science led him to a flexible, accommodating theory of socialist leadership. Because he thought that people could be counted on to reach socialist conclusions when given the relevant facts, he came to deprecate editorials containing explicit socialist dogma, just as he deprecated the "sermon-novel."

Cahan and Propaganda: "What Did the People Care About Partisan Disputes?"

When Cahan arrived in Manhattan in 1882, he loosely identified as an anarchist. By this he meant a revolutionary socialist open to the use of violence and unwilling to temper his rhetoric in the name of political expediency. He recalls in *Bleter fun Mayn Leben*, however, that the sight of anarchist newspapers on sale at a newsstand in broad daylight immediately made him question the necessity of such an uncompromising approach. If American socialists were free to organize and publish, and if they could eventually achieve socialism through democratic means, then should they not enter the

workaday world of political organization, Cahan wondered, even if that would inevitably mean making some compromises with the status quo? On first arriving in America, “I considered the heroic struggle of our Russian terrorists to be something sacred,” Cahan recalls. “I could not imagine socialism without a bitter struggle.” However, he goes on, “the problem lay in the differences between Russian and American circumstances. The Russian terrorists themselves had acknowledged that such differences were crucial. In their writings they declared openly that they used violence only because the Russian government banned freedom of speech and those rights which citizens of a republic or even of a country with a king and a parliament enjoy.”⁶⁴ As he spent more time in America, Cahan came to see the problem with the anarchists not as their embrace of violence in particular (though that was bad enough) but as their general unwillingness to revise their doctrines in the face of changing circumstances. The anarchists, he claimed, did not bother to learn about the predicament of the average Lower East Side worker, because they already had their entire program worked out. Or more accurately, each individual anarchist had his or her program worked out; the anarchists, in Cahan's recollection, spent most of their time splitting doctrinal hairs, frequently on the editorial pages of their chronically underfunded newspapers.

One suspects that Cahan had anarchists on his mind when he wrote the 1897 short story “A Story of Cooper Union.” The story concerns a Danish bachelor, a sometime poet who has sworn off marriage after reading Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* and absorbing its message that to love a particular person is a selfish distraction from serving humanity in general. “I had taken it into my head that I had been born to fill the universe with a new sort of sunshine – with the dazzling rays of my poetry,” the bachelor tells his friend. “Accordingly, for me to marry and be bothered with a wife and children and the sordid details of family life would be a crime against the interests of humanity, don't you know.”⁶⁵ In a predictable twist, after he rebuffs the advances of a woman he loves and the woman emigrates to

64. Cahan, *Education of Abraham Cahan*, pp. 256-57.

65. Cahan, *Grandma Never Lived in America*, p. 159.

America, the Dane is too heartbroken to write poetry. Doctrinal commitments that close one off from lived experience turn out to be self-defeating.

If the anarchists represented the fixation on abstraction at the expense of the concrete demands of lived experience, Samuel Gompers and his followers in the American Federation of Trades (AFT) seemed, to Cahan, to have the opposite problem. Gompers's rallying cry was “pure and simple unionism”: disavowing any platform beyond strengthening trade unions, he refused to involve himself in doctrinal disputes. Avoiding the language of class struggle, Gompers tried to use collective bargaining to lift industrial laborers into the middle class with minimal changes to the social fabric, one small victory at a time. Cahan was not opposed to Gompers's efforts, but many socialists worried that Gompers, by offering workers what seemed to be the easiest route to a slightly improved standard of living, was siphoning energy away from more thoroughgoing reforms.

Steering between the anarchist Scylla and the Gompersist Charybdis, in 1886 Cahan joined the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), which advocated a full-throated socialist program but was more interested in results than the anarchists were. The SLP was basically a good fit for Cahan, but he was troubled by the actions of one of its leaders, Daniel De Leon, who joined the party in 1890 and became the editor of its paper, the *Arbeiter Tzeitung*, in 1892. De Leon, a Sephardic Jew from a genteel family in the Dutch colony of Curacao, was a learned man who had studied medicine, law, and the history of colonialism at universities in Europe and the United States, and made a living as a lawyer and a professor. Also, unlike most of his Eastern European comrades, De Leon was not an anarchist who came to the SLP from the left. Rather, he arrived from the right, by way of Henry George's single-tax movement, a path more commonly trod by Anglo-Americans. Many SLP members were impressed by his air of being at home in American life and letters. The party would nominate him to run as their representative for New York governor in 1891, 1902, and 1904. By 1897, when he and Cahan first crossed swords in the SLP, De Leon was a formidable figure.

De Leon was a powerful polemicist with a tendency to doctrinal purism. Unlike the anarchists he did not advocate violence, and he wanted to focus on realistic steps that strengthened the working class, but like the anarchists he defined left politics in terms of a rigid orthodoxy, and ruthlessly suppressed heresies. He called his opponents names (a Mr. Goldensink became “Goldenstink” – this was about par for the course), built a network of loyalists who fudged vote counts at SLP meetings, and frustrated the party careers of his rivals. He ridiculed Orthodox Jewish traditions, which sometimes clashed with his theories. Most disastrously, he endorsed dual unionism, the practice of setting up rival unions for the same pool of workers in order to undermine unions with different politics. Dual unions, of course, meant two weak unions instead of one strong one, and ultimately benefited employers. (The anarchists frequently tried dual and sometimes even triple unionism, which is one reason that their stock fell among Lower East Side workers once better-organized socialist groups emerged.) De Leon was particularly prone to dual-unionize against AFT unions, since he believed that the AFT, with its combination of an efficient bureaucracy and a moderate politics, would seduce workers away from socialism. In general, far from trusting that natural inference would guide people to the truth, he seems to have thought that people had to be dragged to it kicking and screaming. More practically-minded SLP members tore their hair out as De Leon repeatedly passed up opportunities to recruit workers into the party, and to form effective unions, in the name of his principles.

Cahan was part of a sizable faction within the SLP that wanted a more pragmatic and accommodating leadership. De Leon railed against these dissidents, accusing them of selling out and becoming bourgeois. Cahan, however, believed that one could keep one's specific doctrinal views to oneself while still leading the masses toward socialism. He demonstrated how this could be done in a popular feature that he wrote for the *Arbeiter Tsietung* under the byline “*Der Proletarishker Maggid*.” (The *maggid* was an itinerant, uncredentialed preacher who stood outside of synagogues and proclaimed his own interpretation of the weekly scripture portions; *Proletarishker* is a laughably slangy

word for “Proletarian.”) Cahan's *Proletarishker Maggid* puts a socialist gloss, however strained and improbable, on the weekly Torah readings. Sometimes the gimmick works well. The *Maggid* makes Joseph's line, “I am your brother whom you sold into slavery,” the basis of a spiel about Jewish bosses who exploited Jewish workers, despite their common origins. At other times the connection is more tenuous, such as when the *Maggid* likens breaking a strike to breaking the Sabbath:

Today our Biblical portion is about strikes. The cloak makers still have a little strike to finish up, the shirt makers are on strike, the pants makers are striking, even our teacher Moses called a mass meeting to talk about a strike. *Va'yak'hel Moishe*, Moses gathered the children of Israel together and said to them: *Sheyshes yommin te'asseh m'lokhoh*, more than six days a week you shouldn't work for the bosses, the seventh day you shall rest.⁶⁶

Cahan's *Maggid* column always has three components: a Torah passage, a reference to current events, and some analogy between them that points in a socialist direction. Cahan dispenses with the jargon of socialist theory, however, and adopts a tone of exaggerated folksiness. Avoiding sweeping statements of principle, he focuses on things that he knows will already be on his readers' minds.

The aversion to theory that Cahan displays in *Der Proletarishker Maggid* is probably, in part, a reaction against De Leon's dogmatism. De Leon aside, however, Cahan had become a principled pacifist in the realm of doctrinal disputes. When a group of anti-De Leonites founded their new newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and made Cahan its editor, many of them wanted to denounce De Leon in its pages. According to Irving Howe, however, “Cahan was determined to shake off the scholastic quarrels of Yiddish radicalism, and when contributors like Louis Miller and Michael Zametkin submitted polemics against their De Leonist rivals, he cut ruthlessly or refused to print them.”⁶⁷ Cahan's critics frequently charged that he did not take ideas seriously, that he was trying to appeal to the lowest common denominator; although there seems to have been some truth in that

66. Quoted in Shuldiner, David Philip. *Of Moses and Marx: Folk Ideology and Folk History in the Jewish Labor Movement*. New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999.

67. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 524.

accusation, it would be more accurate to say that Cahan was so convinced of the natural inferrability of his own ideas that he felt little need to argue about them. Furthermore, if ideas were justified by their uses (“man was not created for a principle; principles were created for man,” Cahan wrote in 1915), then any theory of socialism that could not be communicated to the average worker was pointless. What Cahan wanted was an idea that workers could recognize as the explanation of their own experiences. Cahan's sensibility at this phase of his career is nicely summarized by Roland Sanders: "What was socialism about if not the people? And what did the people care about partisan disputes?"

Cahan and the Vernacular: “The Mama Gab”

Cahan's turn from anarchism to the SLP, from the abstract to the concrete, and from theory to pedagogy also had its corollary at the level of language and style. Those of Cahan's critics who thought him anti-intellectual deplored his colloquial Yiddish style. When Cahan arrived in Manhattan in 1882, the idea of discussing socialism in Yiddish at all was controversial, since many intellectuals thought of Yiddish as a crude “*zhargon*” that was unsuitable for philosophical debate. When Cahan went to his first socialist meeting in America, he impressed its organizers with a fiery impromptu oration in Russian, which was the language used by all the speakers that evening. When the organizers invited him to speak again the next week, Cahan asked if he could deliver his speech in Yiddish. Many workers could not follow the Russian speakers, he complained. “What Jew doesn't speak Russian?,” they asked him incredulously; when he replied “my father,” they grudgingly conceded the point.⁶⁸

In the Vilna of Cahan's youth, Jews used three languages in three different spheres of activity. Religious ceremonies were conducted in Hebrew, ordinary business and domestic conversation took place in Yiddish, and contact with the gentile world, including policemen, bureaucrats, novelists,

68. Cahan, *Education of Abraham Cahan*, p. 237.

philosophers, and radicals, required Russian. Almost every novel and socialist tract that Cahan read as a teenager, not to mention his schoolbooks, were printed in Russian, that language that his father did not speak. For wealthy highbrows and furtive radicals alike, Russian was the vehicle of important debates about the appropriate Jewish response to the gentile Enlightenment and the upheavals of industrialization. When those Russian debates moved some intellectuals to call for organization of the Jewish masses, however, it became clear to some of them that Russian had outlived its usefulness. Jewish mass movements would have to speak Yiddish. These were the stakes in the debate over Russian versus Yiddish: Russian meant a closed discussion for intellectuals only, Yiddish a dialogue with the people.

This debate spilled over into controversy about Yiddish style. Jewish intellectuals who thought of themselves as participants in a cosmopolitan republic of letters, but also wanted to bring their ideas to the Jewish masses, favored a turgid style known as “daitschmerish” that drew heavily on the German side of Yiddish, and often substituted German words even where a non-German Yiddish word existed. Before Cahan became an influential stylist, daitschmerish was the default for American Jewish nationalists and socialists. Cahan describes workers reading Yiddish newspapers of the 1880s, scowling at their incomprehensible vocabulary. Cahan disliked daitschmerish: his model was what he called the “mama gab,” Yiddish as it was spoken in the home. This choice dovetailed nicely with his strategy of emphasizing concrete situations rather than abstract principles, since the mama gab could be richly descriptive of everyday life, while many theoretical terms were only available as German or Russian loanwords. More importantly, though, the mama gab was the language best suited for the “folk teacher” role that Cahan was carving out for himself. As Ronald Sanders puts it, “Cahan had a mind that naturally thought in concrete examples; in this respect he was the distinct product of an East European Jewish folk tradition, represented by the parable making of the Hasidic *rebbe* or by the homely style of the *maggid*, the traveling preacher whose Sabbath-afternoon sermons were usually an onrush of

anecdote and apothegm. For him, finding and applying the example that was at once true, vivid, and popular yielded an intellectual satisfaction not unlike that which comes to most people when finding the solution to a mathematical problem.”⁶⁹

The mama gab's appeal was not its connection to some unsullied realm of Jewish culture free from the imported language of the intellectuals; rather, it was simply the fact that it was the language that people understood, and the language in which one could teach them. Cahan was perfectly happy to publish Yinglishisms like “*Ich vel scrobbin dem floor, klinen die vindes, un polishen dem stov,*” if that was how people talked.⁷⁰ Indeed, although he chose to write his journalism in Yiddish, he looked forward to the day when Jewish workers would speak English, a language in which they would have wider access to information. In an English piece that Cahan wrote for the *Commercial Advertiser* in 1898, he quotes an anonymous East Side Jew who says that “it is just because they [Jewish workers] read the Yiddish papers that they are interested in the world outside of their own district and become ambitious to know English in order to read the English papers. After they have learned that, they discard Yiddish altogether and read nothing but English.”⁷¹ It is quite possible that Cahan invented this anonymous figure as a mouthpiece for his own ideas; in later years he was suspected of writing some of the letters to his own advice column under assumed names. By 1910, at any rate, Cahan was ready to predict the decline of Yiddish under his own name. In the preface to a Yiddish *History of the United States* that he offered as a premium to *Forward* subscribers, he writes:

Our people, however, has found in America its securest corner since the loss of its national homeland. [...] We will not be drawn into a discussion concerning the ultimate fate of Yiddish in America. The children of our immigrants do not speak Yiddish, but English (and there's no use bemoaning this); as long, however, as there are Jewish immigrants to America, Yiddish will be the language of the majority.⁷²

69. Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 105.

70. Cahan, *Education of Abraham Cahan*, p. 356.

71. Cahan, *Grandma Never Lived in America*, p. 290.

72. Quoted in Sollors, Werner and Marc Shell, eds. *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of*

The rationale behind Cahan's choice of language and style was pragmatic, and grew out of his conviction that familiarizing his readers with concrete details that bore on their daily lives was more important than maintaining purity of language or culture.

Cahan and Reportage: “Life Puts On Its Own Plays”

Just as he had to stake out an intermediate position between tendentious sermon-novels and the genteel “chromo-sentimentality” of prestigious American publishers in literature, between anarchists and Gompersists in politics, and between partisans of scholarly jargon and Yiddish-language purists in matters of style, as a journalist Cahan also had to mediate between the lurid sensationalism associated with the terms “yellow journalism” in English and *shund* (trash) in Yiddish, on the one hand, and the parched didacticism of the Jewish socialist press on the other.⁷³ In all of these areas he was engaged in the same struggle to advance scientific socialism by directing the average worker's attention to facts whose socialistic import would be obvious.

Cahan started publishing journalistic work almost as soon as it was legally feasible for him to do so (i.e., as soon as he had left Tsarist Russia). From 1882, the year of his immigration to the United States, until 1884, he sent dispatches about the state of the East Side Jewry to *Rusски Yevrey* (*The Russian Jew*), a St. Petersburg paper. In 1883 he wrote his first piece of English journalism, an article in the *New York World* that insisted that, contrary to an earlier article in the same paper, the Russian people were not happy with the coronation of Alexander III. From 1884 until 1886, he wrote local-color sketches of East Side life for curious readers of the *New York Sun and Press*. Later in 1886

Original Texts with English Translations. New York and London: New York University Press, 2000.

73. Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 182.

he abandoned his English journalism and helped found *Di Neie Tseit* (*The New Era*), the first Jewish socialist newspaper in New York; this precariously financed weekly lasted just a few months. While *Di Neie Tseit* was running, Cahan “took the unprecedented step of going out among [his readers] personally to question and examine their reactions” to his articles, indicating that he had already begun to imagine his journalism as a conversation with the average worker.⁷⁴

After *Di Neie Tseit* folded, Cahan started to write regularly for *The Workman's Advocate*, the SLP's English paper; he wrote for almost every issue during the years 1886-1889. *The Workman's Advocate* was a rather doctrinaire outfit, and much of Cahan's work for them consisted of the sort of dogmatic proclamation that he would later renounce. In 1890 the SLP started a Yiddish newspaper, the *Arbeiter Tseitung* (*Workman's Paper*), of which Cahan became the editor in the following year. There he started to do the sort of popularizing work that would become his signature: in addition to the *Proletarishker Maggid*, he also translated or summarized many works of history, science, and realist literature (*ibid.*). From 1894 until 1897 he was the editor of *Die Tsukunft* (*The Future*), a highbrow monthly put out by the Yiddish-speaking section of the Socialist Workers' Party of America, where his target audience was somewhat more erudite. Also, since art and science were *Die Tsukunft's* main topics (and also, no doubt, because the paper was not part of the De Leon-led SLP bureaucracy), the pressure to conform to a strict party line was somewhat relaxed. As we shall see when we turn to his fiction, Cahan frequently felt the urge to withdraw into a more learned and refined cultural enclave, free from the demands of popularization. That seems not to have been what he really wanted, though, since he kept throwing himself back into the fray of politics.

While editing *Die Tsukunft* Cahan remained involved in the frustrating internecine struggles of the SLP's Publishing Association, which was dominated by a clique of De Leon's allies. One SLP member, a friend of Cahan's named Louis Miller, was particularly unhappy with this state of affairs, and hatched

74. Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, p. 18.

a plan to seize control of the Publishing Association's board when it was scheduled to add new members in January of 1897. The chairman of the board thwarted Miller's plan by, at the last minute, appointing extra secretaries who produced phony vote counts. The board remained in De Leonist hands, and a furious Miller led the anti-De Leonists to a nearby meeting hall where they resolved to publish their own socialist paper outside of any party bureaucracy, funded by advertisements. They called this paper the *Vorwaerts (Forward)*, and appointed Cahan as editor. Here Cahan thought he had finally found a venue for his anti-dogmatic socialism. To his dismay, however, several members of the *Forward's* board wanted to fill the pages of the new paper with the denunciations of De Leon that they had been bursting to publish for the past few years. In Cahan's mind, the purpose of the *Forward* was to try out a new kind of socialist journalism, one that spoke directly to the people about the things that mattered to them and did not bore them with the inside baseball of party politics. His associates, it turned out, did not really share his objection to De Leon's tedious hairsplitting; they just wanted a venue where they could split hairs in their own way. This conflict of visions came to a head in August of 1897, when Cahan tried to exercise his editorial prerogative by refusing to print their attacks on De Leon; the board ruled that such a decision was not the editor's to make, and forced him to run them anyhow. Cahan resigned in disgust.

He quickly found a new berth at the Commercial Advertiser, a venerable paper which was then being completely reinvented by Lincoln Steffens, a dynamic young editor who was still working out the journalistic ethos that would eventually issue in his famous muckraking series such as "The Shame of the Cities" (1902). In 1896 Cahan had published his novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, which had been highly praised by Howells in a front-page review in the New York World. The review bore the subtitle "The Great Novelist Hails Abraham Cahan, the Author of 'Yekl,' as a New Star of Realism, and Says that He and Stephen Crane Have Drawn the Truest Pictures of East Side Life."⁷⁵ So,

75. Howells, William Dean. "New York Low Life in Fiction." *New York World* July 26 1896.

although Cahan actually had little experience as a reporter, he had a reputation in the literary world as someone who could give what Howells had called “New York Low Life” narrative interest. This made him just the man to suit Steffens, who was at a personal and professional crossroads that mirrored Cahan's in some ways. Steffens had recently returned to the United States after a disappointing encounter with academic life in Germany, where he had switched focus repeatedly, from ethics to art history to psychology, looking, Henry Adams-like, for a stable frame in which to make sense of a world that seemed increasingly dynamic. He left without completing a degree, and, landing a job as a reporter at the *Evening Post*, sought different kinds of answers in his muckraking articles on Wall Street trusts, Tammany Hall, and corruption in the New York Police Department. He soon grew dissatisfied with the *Post*, however, finding himself on one side of “an unfortunate polarization taking place in the New York daily press: on the one side, Hearst's *Journal* and Pulitzer's *World* were pioneering new realms of irresponsible sensationalism, while on the other, papers like the *Evening Post* and, subsequently, the *New York Times*, were moving in the direction of the merest dry, factual reporting of 'the news.’”⁷⁶ Hearst grabbed the public's attention but did not direct it to important facts; the *Post* did the converse. Steffens wanted to practice a type of journalism that made the news interesting by following stories to their sources in specific people with recognizably human motives. He got his chance when a wealthy German friend from his student days died and somewhat inexplicably left him \$12,000.⁷⁷ Together with another like-minded *Evening Post* man, Henry J. Wright, Steffens bought the *Commercial Advertiser* and turned it into something that was unprecedented in American journalism.

Steffens proceeded to fire almost all of the experienced journalists on the staff. “When a reporter no longer saw red at a fire, when he was so used to police news that a murder was not a human tragedy but only a crime, he could not write police news for us,” Steffens explains in his autobiography. “We

76. Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 210.

77. Steffens, Lincoln. *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1981 (1931), p. 294.

preferred the fresh staring eyes to the informed mind and the blunted pencil.” To replace the old hands, Steffens sought “fellows [...] whose professor of English believed they were going to be able to write and who themselves wanted to be writers, provided, however, that they did not intend to be journalists.” He took an instant shine to Cahan, whose “incessant propaganda” bored him but whose ability to turn facts into vivid stories he prized. Steffens soon discovered, however, that these two sides of Cahan were deeply related. The *Commercial Advertiser*'s crew of young aesthetes loved to argue about the lines dividing “literature” and “journalism,” and Cahan, the group's most experienced literary writer and the most ardent partisan of realism, amazed them with the vigor and clarity with which he maintained his “scientific” aesthetic theories and applied them to specific novels. Perhaps most importantly, Cahan also anchored these debates in the lived experience of the city. He frequently brought the *Advertiser* writers to the East Side to watch the debate between realism and romanticism, then raging among Jewish immigrants of all social classes, play out. Steffens recalls:

[Cahan brought us] to the cafes where the debate was on at every table and to the theaters where the audience divided: the realist party hissing a romantic play, the romanticists fighting for it with clapping hands and sometimes with fists or nails. A remarkable phenomenon it was, a community of thousands of people fighting over an art question as savagely as other people had fought over political or religious questions, dividing families, setting brother against brother, breaking up business firms, and finally, actually forcing the organization of a rival theater with a company pledged to realism against the old theater, which would play any good piece.

Cahan, for his part, got a crash course in investigative reporting, which had never been among his duties in the Yiddish press. Steffens started him on the police beat.⁷⁸

Despite his aversion to “propaganda,” Steffens believed that his humanized but rigorously factual reporting had a definite social purpose. In this, again, he was rather like Cahan, and their ideas about how journalism related to the greater good bore a family resemblance, which made for a symbiotic working relationship between the two men. Steffens recalls frequently giving Cahan instructions like these:

78. Steffens, *Autobiography*, pp. 314-18.

“Here, Cahan, is a report that a man has murdered his wife[.] [...] If you can find out just what happened between that wedding and this murder, you will have a novel for yourself and a short story for me. Go on now, take your time, and get this tragedy, as a tragedy.”

With assignments like that one, Cahan got a chance to ply his trade as a realist, using a concrete example to direct the public's attention to the inadequacies of the status quo. Steffens got something similar: “Our stated ideal for a murder story,” he explains, “was that it should be so understood and told that the murderer would not be hanged, not by our readers. We never achieved our ideal, but there it was; and it is scientifically and artistically the true ideal for an artist and for a newspaper: to get the news so completely and to report it so humanly that the reader will see himself in the other fellow's place” (ibid.). While Cahan saw every unpleasant event as a symptom of society's deviation from natural laws, Steffens saw it as a chance to demonstrate a truth about human nature: how easy it was for people to give in to temptation, how small the gulf between the vicious and the virtuous really was. By 1910 (well after Cahan had left the *Commercial Advertiser*), Steffens had recast his ideal in Christian terms. In a speech about the bombing of a newspaper building in California, he declared that

Mercy is scientific, as Christianity is. If our evils have causes, if there are diseases to account for individual crimes of weakness, if there are deliverable temptations to account for individual felonies of strength, if there are removable causes for bribery, corruption, poverty, crime, and war – then the doctrine of forgiveness instead of punishment for the sinner is sound, scientific, and – it is natural. It appeals to some instinct in man.⁷⁹

Steffens frequently used this argument behind closed doors to beg politicians for mercy on behalf of others, but he claims in his autobiography that he never mentioned Christianity explicitly: his “sound, scientific” observations about society made the argument for clemency on their own.⁸⁰ He confirmed Cahan's growing conviction that the best way to encourage political change was to tell simple human stories about such places that brought them to readers' attention and made their relationship to the

79. Ibid., pp. 317, 671.

80. Though Walter Lippmann, who served an apprenticeship with Steffens in 1911, recalled that Steffens delivered a Christian sermon to the town of Greenwich, Connecticut, after discovering widespread bribery there. See Steel, Ronald. *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. New York: Transaction Publishers, 1980, p. 37.

wider world clearer.

When Steffens left the *Commercial Advertiser* in 1901 for *McClure's Magazine* (where he worked alongside Willa Cather), the brilliant group he had assembled quickly dissipated. Working for Steffens had helped Cahan burnish his journalistic credentials, and he was now getting commissions to write for the *Atlantic Monthly* and other prestigious publications; he was also in high demand as a freelancer for the Yiddish press. Additionally, he was making a little bit of money from his literary work. Between these occupations he was squeaking out a modest but reasonably secure living. So when, one day on a visit to the *Forward* offices in March of 1902, he was asked to return as the paper's editor, he was in a position to say no. The *Forward's* staff explained that they were in a financial crisis: all the Yiddish papers were losing readers to the English-language press, which seemed to offer more relevant news. It was just as Cahan had foretold. Cahan considered their offer and laid down a few conditions, including full control of the paper and a half-day schedule that would allow him to pursue his many side projects. The most important thing, however, was that the *Forward's* writers would have to agree to a new set of principles, or rather to Cahan's old principles that had been sharpened during his stint with Steffens. He gave them the following lecture:

“You and your comrades are utterly parochial in your outlook. But if the *Forward* remains what it is, it won't get very far. It won't get to a very large audience because it doesn't interest itself in the things that the masses are interested in when they aren't preoccupied with their daily struggle for bread. I'm telling you, Lief [an editor], it's as important, say, to teach the reader to carry a handkerchief in his pocket as it is to teach him to carry a union card. And it's as important to respect the opinions of others as it is to have opinions of one's own.”⁸¹

The *Forward* staff agreed, and assured Cahan that their days of intraparty polemics were over. A few days later Cahan accepted the offer. He remained in that position for the rest of his career (except for a brief period in late 1902 through early 1903, when he resigned in protest over the interference of some

81. Quoted in Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 250.

De Leonist diehards who had bought a partial interest in the paper).

Cahan immediately set to work turning the *Forward* into the expression of his vision. On the front page of his first issue in this new period (March 26, 1902), he printed an announcement: “The news and all the articles will be written in pure, plain *Yiddishe Yiddish*, and we hope that every line will be interesting to all Yiddish-speaking people, big and little” (quoted in DJ 254). The same issue ran human interest stories in the *Commercial Advertiser* mold, such as “In Love with *Yiddishe Kinder*,” a collection of observations about interfaith romances. It also included pieces with a more direct connection to socialism that still led with anecdotes, such as “Protzentniks [Percenter] in Sweatshops,” about bosses who made high-interest payday loans to their own employees. Its lead editorial encouraged working-class Jews to send their children to the tuition-free City College, but chastised those who had been sent to college and climbed into the professional class only to scorn their parents after assimilating the genteel prejudices of their new milieu.⁸² Every article was carefully attuned to the day-to-day concerns of the *Forward's* readers, though only some of them tried to raise those readers' class consciousness. This strategy was the inverse of that of the polemical *Forward* that Cahan had abandoned in 1897. Cahan maintained it for the rest of his tenure at the paper.

No *Forward* feature better encapsulates Cahan's sensibility than *A Bintel Brief* (*A Bundle of Letters*), a column that started running in the *Forward* in 1906. *Forward* readers were invited to ask the editor for advice on any kind of question, and Cahan (or at least somebody who wrote above the name “*Redaktor*” (editor)) would give a brief response. Soon the feature took off, and letters poured in describing difficult situations at home or at work. Wives complained of their verbally abusive husbands; mothers were unsure how to react when their daughters brought home Italian men; young men wondered whether to stay in school or support their families; a waiter asked whether he could feed a beggar food from his restaurant without asking his boss's permission; workers wanted to know what

82. Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, pp. 255-57.

to do when a foreman cheated them of their wages. As the *Bintel Brief*'s readership expanded, it wove itself into the fabric of Lower East Side life and became a kind of public square. People started to write in asking for help finding runaway spouses and children, and they were sometimes reunited with their loved ones when another reader wrote in to report their whereabouts. Signs started appearing on the Lower East Side advertising "letters to the *Bintel Brief* written here." Many women (according to Cahan's memoirs at least) learned how to read in order to follow the column. The phrase "*Bintel Brief*" became almost proverbial: Cahan writes that he often overheard people saying of domestic gossip, "that's one for the *Bintel Brief*." *Bintel Brief* letters even provided the plots for realist Yiddish plays.⁸³

A Bintel Brief gratified several different impulses for Cahan. For one thing it seems to have boosted the *Forward*'s circulation. For another it probably appealed to the arrogant side of Cahan that has been described by many people who knew him; he developed a reputation as the man with an answer to every question, the "Esteemed Editor" of daily life. Cahan's own account of the origins of the *Bintel Brief* makes it sound like it was primarily an outgrowth of his theory of realism:

I had begun to think about how to interest the public not only as readers of the *Forverts* but also as writers for the *Forverts*. Speaking with my coworkers, I would express the following thought: the *Forverts* must be a living newspaper, that is, not only must its articles be interesting to read but much of its material must come from life itself. In this connection, I would often quote the saying, 'Life is more curious than made-up tales.' I had a wish, therefore, that the *Forverts* would receive stories 'from life itself': dramas, comedies, or curious events of the sort that would be created not on the desk of a writer but in the dwellings, in the factories, in the cafes – every place where life puts on its own plays. I would often tell my colleagues that the most forceful theatrical pieces are the ones that are produced not on the stage but in the real world, among real people. This is how I developed the plan to attempt to extract from reality as many interesting events as possible.

Cahan recognized that even an assiduous journalist like himself could never gather as many of the facts of life from which socialism could be naturally inferred as the people themselves could. At first Cahan tried asking the public for "true novels," literary accounts of real events, but he was not impressed with

83. Cassedy, Steven. "A Bintel Brief: The Russian Intellectual Meets the American Mass Media." *East European Jewish Affairs* 34,1 (2004) 104-120, p. 105.

the few submissions that trickled in, which he found overwritten, self-conscious, and insufficiently realist. The public, evidently, could not find in its own experiences the evidences for socialism that were “at once true, vivid, and popular.” That work would have to be done by someone with more perspective: Cahan himself. So he switched the *Bintel Brief* to the letter-to-the-editor format that it retains today, and supplied the socialist exegesis himself in the editorial reply. For example, one can clearly see him trying to parlay a domestic problem into a critique of capitalism in a letter of August 8th, 1915. A woman writes in complaining that her husband is jealous of her reading; she feels intellectually stifled. The editor's reply draws on Chernishevsky's idea that the oppression of women is a necessary corollary to the exploitation of the working class:

‘The bitter life of the world of women is described here’, writes the editor, ‘the whole dark enslavement of the female sex of today’s working class ... The principal cause is naturally their [the couple’s] condition as a worker’s family in today’s [economic] order. She is tied down to the house and to the children. It is impossible for them to go out together.’⁸⁴

Cahan was indeed an admirer of Chernishevsky, so there is little reason to doubt that he sincerely saw this writer's plight as a byproduct of the evils of capitalism. Nonetheless, the link between the woman's story and her economic circumstances was probably not as clear-cut as Cahan (or whoever wrote the reply) made it out to be. After all, even wealthy husbands can feel intellectually insecure. In moments such as this one can see the contortions that were sometimes necessary in order for Cahan to maintain his theory that any conversation about real problems is incipiently a conversation about socialism. Much of the time the editor did not even try, and gave a practical answer that made no reference to class struggle. In 1908, for instance, a man with tuberculosis asked if he must stop kissing his young daughter for fear of giving her the disease; the editor sadly affirmed that he must, and left it at that.⁸⁵

84. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 104, 114-15.

85. Metzker, Isaac, ed. *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward*. New York: Random House, 1971, p. 88.

This tendency to engage readers without always turning their attention to socialism annoyed many of Cahan's socialist comrades, whose party dues helped subsidize the paper. (The *Forward* was sometimes completely ad-financed, and at other times under the wing of one or another socialist party.) In one incident, Cahan ran an editorial advising mothers to provide their children with handkerchiefs.irate readers wrote in asking what this editorial was doing in a socialist paper. Cahan's reply was perhaps his most famous one-liner: “And since when has socialism been opposed to clean noses?”⁸⁶ Privately, Cahan would explain that he was trying to attract readers to the paper with items of general interest, so that their eyes might wander to its more overtly socialist content. Also, he added, he was making “more and more socialist converts” throughout the 1900s and 1910s. His critics retorted that the “socialism” he was converting them to was becoming rather thin gruel. And, as Irving Howe writes, “here it was they who were right” (*WF* 529): by the 1930s Cahan, while still professing to be a socialist, had come out in favor of the New Deal and supported Franklin Delano Roosevelt for President.⁸⁷ It is not clear whether this tack to the middle was something Cahan had planned as far back as the early *Forward* days, as his critics charged, or whether his popularizing approach to journalism compelled him to move gradually in that direction.

Cahan and Pedagogical Theory: “Interest Precedes Retention, Not Otherwise”

Cahan's socialist critics thought that he trusted the people too much, that instead of leading them he was following them down the path of least resistance, at the end of which was assimilation, liberalism, and middle-class identity. Other observers thought he erred too much in the other direction; according to the *Forward* writer Binyomen Bialostotski, Cahan “*wanted to love* the common people, but he also

86. Kanfer, Stefan. *Stardust Lost: The Triumph, Tragedy, and Meshugas of the Yiddish Theater in America*. Random House Digital, 2007, 94-95.

87. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 529.

disliked them, and arrogantly and domineeringly held himself above them” (quoted in Kellman 33). His strategy of speaking to the public in a language that it understood both asserted the average worker's right to be included in socialist conversations and tacitly admitted that he or she could not be expected to grasp the finer points of socialist theory. There was a part of Cahan that wanted to ask the people what socialism really meant, and an equally important part of him that wanted to tell them. A phrase from Ellen Kellman's thoughtful dissertation on Cahan's journalism nicely captures this ambivalence: “He believed that the mission of a working-class paper was to arouse the social awareness of its readers and *direct them* in a course of *self-education*.”⁸⁸

Cahan, like other theorists of aesthetic education from Schiller onward, thought that he could finesse this apparent contradiction by taking advantage of the special properties of the aesthetic. For Cahan, the realist artist advances the cause of socialism by making himself (and for Cahan it was almost always “himself”) into a kind of supplement to the reader, a spokesman for parts of the reader's mind that exist below the surface of the reader's consciousness. As he puts it in an 1896 *Tsukunft* article, “The artist–novelist paints an image that the ordinary man recognizes but that the ordinary man himself would not be capable of summoning up in his thoughts. The artist selects those conditions that underscore, draw attention to, certain interesting phenomena in the life of men.”⁸⁹ There is knowledge latent in the worker's mind, Cahan argues, of which the worker him- or herself is unaware, but of which the artist *is* aware. The artist can thus acquaint the worker with his or her own knowledge. In order to do so successfully, the artist must know two things: the larger truth that the worker possesses but cannot access (roughly, the truths of Darwin and Marx), and the specific location of the border between this submerged knowledge and the worker's conscious mind. (This, again, is the dual pedagogical basis that Dewey labels “the child and the curriculum.”) The artist's goal is to move this border further and

88. Kellman, Ellen Deborah. “The Newspaper Novel in the *Jewish Daily Forward* (1900-1940): Fiction as Entertainment and Serious Literature.” Diss. Columbia Univ., 2000, p. 33, emphasis mine.

89. Quoted in Cassedy, “Bintel Brief,” p. 117.

further into the heretofore unaccessed territory. Therefore he must do all of his work at the border, however far it might be from encompassing the totality of his own knowledge. For Cahan, then, literature is part of the larger “craft of popularizing complex matters.” “The writer or teacher,” he wrote in *Bleter*, “needs imagination to figure out how the mind of the reader or listener works. [...] First and foremost, everything must be conveyed in a language which can be easily understood. But that's not all. One must find special ways of portraying the topic to a reader whose mind is not prepared to grasp it. A parable can be extremely useful in this regard. It can often clarify the most complicated matter. Through an effective parable, the reader gets the point very easily.”⁹⁰ Or as Cahan put it elsewhere, “If you want to pick up a child from the ground, you first have to bend down to him. If you don't, how will you reach him?”⁹¹

The risk, of course, was that once he had bent down and grasped the “child,” there was no guarantee that he would be able stand upright again. As Marc Redfield has shown, Schiller's model of aesthetic education requires the ephebe (the person seeking aesthetic education) to give herself over to the exemplar (the provider of aesthetic education) without first certifying that the exemplar is trustworthy, since by definition the ephebe does not possess the knowledge that would allow her to judge the exemplar. By betting all its chips on the workers' power to draw the same “natural inferences” from events as the artist, Cahan's model of aesthetic education exposes itself to the opposite problem: the exemplar must give himself over to the ephebe, and take the chance that by dumbing things down he is not setting the stage for learning but only removing knowledge from the conversation. In literary terms, the risk was the proliferation of unedifying *shund* (literally “trash,” but idiomatically, sensational fiction). By even the more favorable accounts, there was a great deal of *shund* in the *Forward*. Bialostotski again: “Cahan literally worshiped Tolstoy and Turgenev and

90. Quoted in Kellman, “Newspaper Novel,” p. 48.

91. Quoted in Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 263.

Chekhov, and continually instructed [the readers] on the meaning of romantic realism or psychological realism. But who, for the sake of success, would more readily publish trivial sketches and shund than Ab. Cahan?"⁹² Some of this material Cahan freely admitted was there just to attract eyeballs that might drift across the page to more substantive features. On the other hand, Cahan saw some pieces that might seem trivial to socialist ideologues as elements of his political pedagogy. Again realism was the key term for Cahan. Both realist fiction and shund appealed to something that Cahan consistently called the reader's "interest" ("interes" in Yiddish). That is, they pushed readers' buttons and provoked a sense of investment, rather than inviting the reader's dispassionate scrutiny in the manner of abstract polemics. In this sense both realist fiction and *shund* had to meet readers halfway.

Unlike *shund*, realist fiction, for Cahan, arouses interest in a way that catalyzes the process of self-education. For one thing, as we have already seen, realist fiction was supposed to direct readers' attention to instances of injustice that might provoke criticism of capitalism. In a series of *Arbeiter Tseitung* essays that ran from December 1893 through January 1894 on the difference between good and bad novels, Cahan also identifies another reason to prefer realism. "How should the novel create pleasure for the reader?," Cahan asks. "How should it arouse his interest? Through the events? If so, then the characters who play a role in the story are secondary. If a murder could take place, for example, without a murderer and without a victim, it wouldn't matter, because the murder is the main point of the story. The more unusual, the more densely intertwined, the more frightening the events are, the better. [...] This is what the interest consists of, when you look only for a story in a novel." Bad fiction, that is, isolates the reader's interest from the effects of actions on human experience. Good realist fiction does the opposite. A good novelist, Cahan argues, describes how events give rise to psychological reactions. Kellman usefully summarizes his argument: "Through the many details that comprise each moment of a character's consciousness, the reader comes to understand the emotions that

92. Quoted in Kellman, "Newspaper Novel," p. 33.

drive him or her, and through this, to empathize profoundly with the character. Rather than focusing on the events that take place in the story, an appreciative reader savors the nuances in the writing and is moved by the characters' emotional responses to events as they take place.”⁹³ Realism's superiority lies in its representation of the very act of taking an interest in everyday things. As Jules Chametzky has noted, Cahan's theory of realism is a reaction against a pernicious distinction in the American literature of his day between a so-called realism interested only in life's gritty, materialistic dimensions and a genteel sentimentality that viewed moral and intellectual matters through a haze of sentimentalism. True realism, for Cahan, must smoothly blend the realm of things, activities, outward happenings of all kinds, into the equally objective realm of “realities of the spirit.”⁹⁴

Why was Cahan so preoccupied with “interest”? He does not seem (based on my admittedly limited knowledge of his sources) to have borrowed the term from the Russian critics who are the main influences on his theory of realism. I believe that he came to it via another source: the debates about pedagogical theory that were so prevalent in his American milieu. “Interest” was perhaps the most important word in normal schools and educational associations during the 1890s and 1900s. Every leading educator had an opinion on its meaning and its connection to the ideal of a democratic education. In this section we will reconstruct some of these opinions and situate Cahan within the landscape of contemporary pedagogical theory. Then, having demonstrated his affinities with one particular school of thought (the Herbartian revival) and suggested reasons for those affinities, we will reexamine the educational ideas behind his theory and practice of fiction.

Cahan's interest in education reform is most apparent in the prolonged section of *Bleter fun Mayn Leben* in which he describes his time at the Vilna Teacher Training Institute (VTTI). VTTI teachers, Cahan recounts, had been hired based on their willingness to toe the official line of Tsarism. Students

93. Ibid., p. 39.

94. Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, p. 33.

were required to learn by rote from approved textbooks, and were expected to become, as Cahan puts it, mere “reading machines and phonographs.” Students who put ideas in their own words were given failing grades, partly because many of the teachers did not even understand the ideas in the textbooks. This drill pedagogy, unlike its American counterpart, was not intended to train mental faculties such as memory and observation, but to lock students into a certain way of thinking. For student to ingest the pre-approved textbooks was politically safe; to encourage them to think according to prevailing standards of intellectual rigor, when so much of the Russian intelligentsia was reformist or radical, was dangerous. The VTTI's educational goal was to discourage the kind of inference on which Cahan would base his journalistic and literary ideals.

The White Terror and the Red, Cahan's 1905 novel of the Russian underground, makes the connection between pedagogy and politics explicit. One of the main characters is a Russian prince named Pavel who becomes an unlikely revolutionary. Pavel presented Cahan with an interesting problem: what could drive a highborn man like him to join the underground? Cahan, consistent with his (by 1905) long-established discounting of conversion-by-argumentation, needed to find a motivation rooted in personal experience. He found it in Pavel's school, which is described in terms that strongly suggest the Vilna Teacher Training Institute. One of Pavel's teachers, a decent man named Pievakín, is sent to Siberia when he accidentally gives a lesson that is at odds with the contents of his textbook. (He describes the difference between an absolute and a limited monarchy in a way that is not flattering to the Tsar.) At this point Pavel realizes that the Tsar is standing between him and the free pursuit of truth, and his political evolution begins. Pedagogical corruption, in Cahan's mature work (including his memoirs, the first volume of which was published in 1926), is a symptom of political corruption.

This diagnosis makes it all the more significant, then, that Cahan's critique of the hierarchical, regimented, fragmented curriculum at the Institute was couched in the language of “interest.” Summing up his critique of the Institute, he writes that “modern pedagogy condemns memorizing entire lessons.

Experience proves that the old system stifled able children and deadened their initiative. Interest precedes retention, not otherwise.” “Interest precedes retention, not otherwise”: this could have been Cahan's motto during his feud with the De Leonists and the Yiddish grammar purists, during his foray with Steffens, and when he conceived the “*Proletarishker Maggid*” and the *Bintel Brief*.

American Educators' Interest in Interest

Among the most hotly contested issues in the formative pre-1900 period of American progressive education was what John Dewey called “the lawsuit of *Interest v Effort*.”⁹⁵ The party of effort, adherents of the traditional pedagogy of mental discipline, which emphasized drill and memorization, held that the very unattractiveness of this style for students was one of its strengths, since the exercise of willpower that it demanded of students was itself a major educational objective. If they wanted students to act like “reading machines and phonographs,” it was not because they feared intellectual originality, but because they valued a quick and precise memory. The party of interest, of which the Herbartians were the chief representatives, argued, essentially, that while reading machines and phonographs might be impressive in a way, they were not examples of real learning. The kind of learning that sticks, they held, has to mean something to the student at the moment it is learned, to take its place among their preexisting ideas, not float in decontextualized lists of names, dates, and the like. In order for students to really learn about the world, and not just memorize verbal formulas, their interest has to be engaged, by which the Herbartians in particular meant there has to be a smooth fit between new and old knowledge. Therefore the Herbartians also stressed “continuity” within the curriculum, stringing together sequences of lessons, and of steps within lessons, in order to minimize disjunctive leaps.

95. Dewey, John. *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will*. National Herbart Society Supplement to the Yearbook for 1895. Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company, 1896, p. 6.

These ideas of interest and continuity derive from the work of the Swiss schoolmaster Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a major influence on the German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart, for whom Herbartianism is named. In 1798 in the city of Staens, Pestalozzi established a school for children orphaned by the war between Switzerland and Napoleon. Strongly influenced by Rousseau's *Emile*, Pestalozzi believed, in the words of one educational historian, that “ordinarily nature is sufficient to guide the growth of the mind,” and a relatively libertarian pedagogy is best, but that for some children “the accident of their birth, or the destruction and misery then afflicting Europe in the wake of revolution and war, removed all hope that learning by natural means could occur.”⁹⁶ To return such children to the path of natural development, Pestalozzi believed, very precise interventions were necessary.

Pestalozzi's central insight was that children learn from nature according to certain observable patterns, and that teachers could teach either with or against the their grain. These patterns were distinguished by the absence of disjunctive leaps from one idea to the next. Children naturally move from simple observations to abstract ideas, he believed, in a gradual unbroken manner. “From the measurement of sound one is led to the study of rhythm in music, while from the measurement of form we are led to geometry in drawing,” and so on in other subjects.⁹⁷ A Pestalozzian teacher would begin instruction in drawing, for example, by asking children to observe simple shapes such as long and short lines and different types of curves. From there she would move to two-dimensional figures such as circles and squares. Then she would ask the children to copy complex figures composed of many shapes put together. Eventually she would introduce perspective and three-dimensional figures such as cubes and spheres, which could be combined to form shapes approximating real objects. Finally she would conclude that the children were ready to draw three-dimensional objects from life. Pestalozzi

96. Efland, Arthur. *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*. New York: Teachers College, 1990, p. 77.

97. Ibid.

taught all subjects in this way, never introducing a concept that depended for its full understanding on a simpler concept that had not yet been fully internalized. While the pedagogy of drill tended to isolate objects from their contexts, Pestalozzian pedagogy did the opposite. Pestalozzian pedagogy was indifferent to faculty psychology and its image of the mind as a set of muscles that needed to be pumped up in a balanced way to produce a coherent self. The coherence with which Pestalozzi was concerned pertained to the student's mental image of the world.

The bedrock beneath the simplest concepts was immediate sense impressions. Any abstraction that was not derived from these impressions in an unbroken manner was not really teachable, Pestalozzi held. The educator's task was to devise continuous pedagogical pathways leading from various sense impressions to the abstract ideas that she eventually wanted to teach. One outgrowth of Pestalozzi's thought was the "object lesson," in which particular objects, sometimes natural objects such as a plant, sometimes special objects designed specifically for Pestalozzian pedagogy, were introduced in order to kick off this process.

Pestalozzi's ideas enjoyed "a brief period of popularity" in American education after the Civil War, when his principles were applied at the Oswego Normal School, the nation's leading experimental teacher training institution at that time (though he was also known earlier – one of his disciples, Joseph Neef, opened a successful school in Philadelphia in 1806). Despite Pestalozzi's relative obscurity in America as an individual thinker, the movement that he represented began to change American education. Of course, these encouraging developments affected a relatively small number of students, mostly in affluent areas. Most students were still subject to an unleavened pedagogy of drill. Also, Pestalozzi's ideas about the ordering of subject matter lent themselves to a kind of superficial hybridization with drill, since drill was relatively indifferent to subject matter. In the series of *Forum* articles running from 1891 to 1893 that, according to Lawrence Cremin, catalyzed popular interest in progressive education, Joseph Mayer Rice describes students undergoing memory drills about musical

notation, standing up when called on to regurgitate a list of facts. These facts seem to be arranged in a Pestalozzian order, beginning with a definition of the musical note as “a sign representing a length or duration in time” (rendered by a harried student as “Notsinrepti length d'ration time”). In the same article Rice describes children being similarly drilled on the difference between straight and crooked lines, an early step in Pestalozzian art instruction.⁹⁸

Pestalozzi's conception of the child, though lively by comparison to that of American drillmasters, was still somewhat wooden. He assumed that all children would progress from object lessons to abstractions in the same way; he did not imagine that students' differing backgrounds would make a pedagogical difference. Indeed canceling out such differences was an important part of his educational mission. It fell to Herbart to update Pestalozzi's ideas along more pluralist lines, or at least more ostensibly pluralist ones.

Johann Friedrich Herbart was a professor of philosophy at the University of Koenigsberg, where he occupied the chair previously held by Kant. Herbart, whose teaching career spanned the first four decades of the nineteenth century, knew Pestalozzi personally and aimed to further educational thought along the lines that he had opened up. Herbart linked Pestalozzi's pedagogical approach to a more fully elaborated psychological theory that dovetailed better with the model of the mind on which physiological psychologists would later alight. In the 1880s and 1890s, decades after Herbart's death, his ideas were taken up in the United States by Charles de Garmo and Frank McMurry, who popularized them by printing widely used normal school textbooks and founding the National Herbart Society, which became an important center of educational thought (even after it drifted away from Herbart's ideas).⁹⁹

The key term in Herbart's educational thought was “apperception.” All true learning, Herbart held,

98. Cremin, Lawrence. *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American education, 1876-1957*. New York: Vintage, 1974, pp. 3-7.

99. Rippa, S. Alexander. *Education in a Free Society: An American History*. New York: Longmann, 1997, p. 171.

involved the assimilation (“apperception”) of new ideas into a body of preexisting knowledge (the “apperceptive mass”), which in turn had been assembled by earlier iterations of this process. Ideas that could not be joined to an apperceptive mass could not be learned at all; one could only memorize their bare verbal form. For Herbart the continuity of knowledge was not simply an important pedagogical principle – it was what made knowledge knowledge. The teacher's task was to continuously augment the student's apperceptive mass by strategically introducing ideas that fit into its vacancies. Thus Herbart emphasized two factors in curriculum design: “concentration,” or the development of a dense apperceptive mass by locating a certain subject such as history, science, or literature at the center of the curriculum, and “correlation,” or the introduction of ideas according to their relationship to the apperceptive mass. One problem with drill, Herbart argued, was that it failed to excite students because it did not give them any notion of what the knowledge they were learning had to do with things they already knew about.

Herbart believed that “interest” was the mind's pleasure response to apperception. Herbart thought that interest could be generated almost at will by a skilled teacher by showing how a new idea was related to the student's apperceptive mass. He believed that the relationship of ideas to each other was not subjective but determined by fundamental philosophical categories, which the mind was drawn toward understanding. It was, accordingly, possible for a teacher to plan interesting lessons for any group of students, once the students' initial apperceptive mass was established; it was not for individual students to find ideas interesting or not according to personal taste. Progressive educators roundly criticized this aspect of Herbart's thought. Even as it paid lip service to the idea of student interest, they objected, it did not do so for the right reasons. For progressive pragmatists in the Dewey mold, for instance, the great desideratum of educational reform was that teachers could not presume to know today what it was that their students would have to know tomorrow; the best they could do was prepare them to take up these unforeseen burdens by training them in the art of living autonomously. Herbart,

by contrast, based his pedagogy on a static world-view and a top-down classroom management style. When Francis Parker, an early pioneer of progressive education, argued that educators should organize the curriculum around the interests of children as they were expressed by the children themselves, De Garmo shot back, in his capacity as president of the Herbart Society, that “the organizing principle [of the curriculum] was not the needs of the child 'but at bottom the principle of philosophical unity that binds all nature into one.’”¹⁰⁰ Statements like De Garmo's were one reason that Dewey declared, in an influential 1895 paper called “Interest as Related to Training of the Will” (published as a supplement to the Herbart Society's yearbook), that “Herbartianism seems to me essentially a schoolmaster's psychology, not the psychology of a child. It is the natural expression of a nation laying great emphasis upon authority and upon the formation of individual character in distinct and recognized subordination to the ethical demands made [...] by that authority. It is not the psychology of a nation which professes to believe that every individual has within him the principle of authority, and that order means coordination, not subordination.”¹⁰¹ Herbartians would protest, of course, that the “philosophical unity that binds all nature into one” was present equally in the consciousness of the individual and in the organization of the state, such that neither term could be seen as above or below the other. Within the mind of every educated person would be found a blueprint for the just society.

The purpose of this foray into educational minutiae is to establish that Cahan's combination of a pedagogy based on interest with a belief in a single immutable truth about the world, the truth of socialism, closely mirrored one of the most talked-about educational philosophies of his American milieu. By consistently using examples tailored to the apperceptive mass of his readership to draw them towards a fixed philosophy, Cahan pursued a quintessentially Herbartian strategy.

100. Pinar, William F., William M. Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter M. Taubman eds. *Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 87.

101. Dewey, *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will*, p. 29.

Herbartianism and Aesthetic Education

American educators saw in both Pestalozzi and Herbart pedagogies that could safeguard democracy, though in somewhat different ways. Pestalozzi's was a kind of country-party pedagogy, emphasizing the virtue of the natural man and the need to protect him from dislocation and decadence. The ideal product of his pedagogy was, translated into an American idiom, something like the “omnicompetent democrat” of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*: a good citizen who did not really need to know anything in particular, since he could puzzle out the answer to any policy question by relying on his knowledge of the way the world worked in general, or, put differently, on his power of natural inference. Like the omnicompetent democrat, the graduate of a Pestalozzian school would have no particular ideas about how society should be organized, only a baseline libertarianism plus the power to judge issues on an ad hoc basis. Similarly, Pestalozzi had no clear idea how the curriculum itself should be organized: he knew that one should proceed from the simple to the complex, but had no notion of which complex ideas were most important to impart. For these reasons the Pestalozzian pedagogy did not seem adequate to American educators who believed that schools needed to keep citizens up-to-date on scientific advances and global affairs, nor to those who wanted schools to promote a concrete social vision. These are also the deficiencies that Herbart sought to correct after he visited Pestalozzi's school. He did so by linking Pestalozzi's pedagogy of continuity to a specific, somewhat idiosyncratic politics in which individuals are morally elevated by participating in a rational state. In order to reconcile Pestalozzi's child-centrism with the Prussian authoritarianism that Dewey rightly saw at the political heart of his pedagogy, Herbart turned to a theory of aesthetic education.

Before discussing the specifics of Herbart's ideas about aesthetic education, we should pause to emphasize the diversity of American responses to his pedagogy. Most educators who were interested in

Herbart seem to have been either unaware of or indifferent to the finer points of his aesthetic and political thought. For some, Herbart's appeal was his alignment with modern science. His seemed to be the only fully developed pedagogy that was consistent with the findings of the new laboratory psychology. In an admiring preface to an 1896 volume that collected Herbart's *The Science of Education* and *The Aesthetic Revelation of the World*, the educator Oscar Hart complains that while “learning by heart, which occupied so large a place in the traditional public school curriculum, was always defended on the ground that it strengthened the memory,” John Locke's “assertion [...] that it did nothing of the kind was unknown or disregarded.” Reflecting a newfound confidence in psychological science, as opposed to the natural philosophy of both the mental discipline and Lockean traditions, Hart believes that today “psychologists can tell us whether and to what extent learning by heart does strengthen the memory, and what kind of learning by heart will strengthen it most.”¹⁰² Hart finds Herbart's associationist psychology most in line with the latest findings. In his 1894 book *Herbart and the Herbartians*, Charles de Garmo, a cofounder of the Herbart Society, observes that under the regime of mental discipline, “our educational literature as well as our practice, is completely adjusted to the notion that the mind is an aggregate of more or less independent faculties.” “The fact that the conclusions of the current educational psychology are not in general accepted by the people or by scientific students of education, is sufficient warrant,” he argues, “if one is needed, for the exposition of a method of thought leading to radically different educational results.”¹⁰³

Another element of Herbartianism's appeal was its purported efficiency in communicating complex subject-matter. This rationale was designed to appeal to the managerial, school-as-knowledge-factory ethos of administrative progressivism. While mental discipline promotes the forced memorization of

102. Felkin, Henry L. and Emmie Felkin. Introduction. *The Science of Education and The Aesthetic Revelation of the World*. By Johann Friedrich Herbart. Trans. Felkin and Felkin. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1896, p. x.

103. Dunkel, Harold B. *Herbart and Herbartianism; an Educational Ghost Story*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970, pp. 23-26.

discrete facts and the training of faculties such as the memory and the reason, Herbartianism, under the rubric of the “concentration” and “correlation” of apperceptive masses, enlists students' participation in a quest to understand the logical connections among different subjects and sub-subjects. Oscar Hart claims that a teacher trained in Herbartian methods “will secure the attention and order of a large class without difficulty, and his lessons will be better arranged so as to teach a larger amount in a shorter space of time.”¹⁰⁴ Here Hart hopes to catch the ears of educators whose primary concerns are managing overcrowded urban schools and keeping the American workforce abreast of innovation.

Herbartianism also appealed to many educators because it promised to continue the nonsectarian moralizing that had been a central aim of the common school movement. When arguing that free education should be offered to all citizens, Horace Mann had stressed its moral element and predicted that without it the public would descend into sectarian strife. Schools should not directly proselytize to students, Mann argued, but faculty psychology held the key to a moral education that did not run afoul of sectarian differences: if the schools drilled students in the right balance of faculties, they would become well-rounded, and hence moral, people. The obsolescence of faculty psychology left educators scrambling to update Mann's idea. What did a well-regulated mind look like for psychologists who saw the mind as a complex network of associations? Herbartians claimed to have solved that problem. De Garmo, for example, asserts that “the ultimate purpose of the Herbartians may be said to be the development of character, not in a narrow subjective sense, but in a broad social one. They seek to fit the child for every important phase of family, social, civil, religious, and economic life – to develop, in short, the whole boy or girl. [...] The strength of their position is, that they show how under favorable circumstances this result can be achieved with the agencies already at the command of the school.”¹⁰⁵ The means by which they solved it shared many of the qualities of covert, disavowed discipline that

104. Hart, Oscar. Preface. In Herbart, *Science of Education*, p. vii.

105. Dunkel, *Herbart and the Herbartians*, p. vi.

critics have noted in the *Bildung* tradition: the gestures in the direction of personal autonomy that turn out, on closer inspection, to be ruses of power; the simultaneous recognition and dismissal of individual difference. Note how de Garmo slips from “the development of character” to “fit[ting] the child for [...] social life,” assuming that these two ends are easily compatible or even indistinguishable.

To understand how Herbart himself attempts to reconcile autonomy and socialization, we must clarify the outlines of his broader psychological theories. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey offers this basic summary of Herbartian psychology:

He denies absolutely the existence of innate faculties. The mind is simply endowed with the power of producing various qualities in reaction to the various realities which act upon it. These qualitatively different reactions are called presentations (Vorstellungen). Every presentation once called into being persists; it may be driven below the "threshold" of consciousness by new and stronger presentations, produced by the reaction of the soul to new material, but its activity continues by its own inherent momentum, below the surface of consciousness. What are termed faculties—attention, memory, thinking, perception, even the sentiments, are arrangements, associations, and complications, formed by the interaction of these submerged presentations with one another and with new presentations. Perception, for example, is the complication of presentations which result from the rise of old presentations to greet and combine with new ones; memory is the evoking of an old presentation above the threshold of consciousness by getting entangled with another presentation, etc. Pleasure is the result of reinforcement among the independent activities of presentations; pain of their pulling different ways, etc.¹⁰⁶

Like Kant, Herbart maintains that the end of human life is to perfect the will by bringing it into harmony with itself. He differs from Kant in his image of the mind, rejecting Kant's architecture of distinct faculties and figuring the mind as a set of data (sense perceptions or facts) linked together by potentially omnidirectional relationships. In the uneducated mind, these relationships form discrete clusters, but the mind as a whole is not unified; the will is divided. In order to fully realize itself, in Herbart's account, the will has to assimilate five mutually reinforcing ideas, which can be briefly summarized:

106. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 54.

- I. The idea of “Inner Freedom,” which involves modifying one's mental clusters in order to eliminate internal discrepancies and act with a unified purpose.
- II. The idea of “Perfection,” which pertains to the “magnitude” of judgments of the will. The magnitude of a judgment is a function of its “Intensity,” or “strength of degree”; its “Extension,” or the “variety of objects compassed”; and its “Concentration,” or the predominance of a single “main effort.” Although “no absolute standard” of magnitude exists, the individual can perceive the superiority of “greater” efforts to “smaller” ones, and “Perfection” is the abstract ideal of progress toward progressively greater ones.
- III. The idea of “Benevolence,” which involves treating the wills of others as elements of one's own judgments, playing the same role in the quest for Inner Freedom as do discrepant elements of one's own mind.
- IV. The idea of “Right,” which involves treating the individual will as a component within a larger social coordination.
- V. The idea of “Equity” or “Retribution,” which requires violators of the ideas of Benevolence and Right to be punished.¹⁰⁷

Education, for Herbart, is the process by which the will incorporates these ideas. So, as the translators of his *Science of Education* and *The Aesthetic Revelation of the World* remark, “the aim of education is defined as Morality: – that is, a will steadfast in obedience to the commands of a taste founded on the relationships of will.”¹⁰⁸

Note the centrality of “taste” to Herbart's moral system. For Herbart, the five ideas are ethical, but “ethics [is] an application of aesthetics,” which he sees as a rule-bound process of judging the fitness of

107. See Felkin and Felkin, Introduction to *Science of Education*, pp. 28-30.

108. Ibid., p. 40.

abstract “relations between elements” as these are represented in the mind. “A single note, say middle C, is not in and by itself [...] pleasing or displeasing” for Herbart, but “becomes so only in relation to another note” in a chord.¹⁰⁹ Just as music theory describes intrinsically good and bad arrangements of notes even when abstracted from the specific instruments involved, Herbart's general theory of aesthetics describes good and bad arrangements of the basic constituents of the mind (which he thinks of as metaphysical monads that can only be conceived abstractly). This sense of good and bad is simultaneously ethical and aesthetic; one who follows the promptings of aesthetic pleasure in a consistent way will also follow the path of morality.

In addition to his overarching vision of education toward the perfect moral idea, Herbart also has a detailed account of the psychological side of instruction. For Herbart, mental life is composed of “presentations” and “concepts.” Presentations are “the elements of mental life,” or experience in the raw, but they nonetheless can be further analyzed. The most basic “primordial presentations” merely involve a simple object and a feeling such as pain or pleasure (e.g., a hot stove and a burned finger), but the majority of presentations are complex experiences linking various things in the world to various affective states. Based on these experiences one can begin to form rational ideas that streamline and unify the will. However, only presentations “which are the distinct and absolute reflection of the thing or idea that caused them, are capable of development by the processes of comparison, abstraction, generalisation, into concepts.”¹¹⁰ Reason involves inferring wider ideas from particular experiences, and from narrower ideas, but, as with Pestalozzi's insistence on grounding all ideas on a concrete basis, the process does not work if one's primary experiences are not well anchored to specific perceptions. The task of the Herbartian educator, therefore, is to furnish students with a stock of primary experiences and then offer further experiences that build on these in a continuous way. As in Schiller's aesthetic

109. Dunkel, *Herbart and the Herbartians*, pp. 5, 87.

110. Felkin and Felkin, Introduction to *Science of Education*, p. 33.

education, the educator offers no arguments for the student to accept or reject, and lays down no explicitly formulated laws. Instead, she makes an what Herbart calls an “aesthetic revelation of the world,” a direct presentation of experience in the raw.

Herbart calls the process by which the student's will absorbs new presentations “apperception.” We have already given a general account of apperception, or the assimilation of new ideas to old ones, and of apperceptive masses, or complexes of old ideas formed by previous acts of apperception; now we will redescribe them in light of Herbart's broader theory of psychology. In *Herbart and the Herbartians* Charles de Garmo offers American educators an extended architectural metaphor for apperception. Every “perception (or sensation) which enters consciousness through the gates of the senses,” he writes, “acts as a stimulus upon the ideas possessed by the mind. It repels everything contrary to it that may be in consciousness, and attracts or recalls all similar things, which now rise [to meet it] with all their connections.” The new perception is, for de Garmo, a kind of magnet that draws toward itself every appropriately charged element within the mind. If it exerts enough attractive force on these elements, it can dislodge them from their existing arrangements and cause them to be rearranged in accordance with the principle of “perfection” described above. De Garmo's figure for a perfect arrangement is an arch: “The stimulated mass of ideas raised simultaneously” by the new perception “may be likened to an arched vault extending in all upward directions from the centre. As long as this arching continues, the central perception has, by virtue of its stimulating power, the controlling influence in consciousness.” At first the perception attracts ideas that are fresh in the mind; if these ideas are consistent with the perception, then they become part of the “arch.” Many of these ideas, however, will be contrary to the perception, and throw their weight against it. If the perception is too weak or vague, then this opposition may end the process of apperception, and only a small rearrangement of mental contents will have occurred. If the perception is strong enough, however, then the opposing ideas will be “check[ed],” and older ideas that accord better with the perception will “rise,

and gradually form the apex of the arch; this becomes the more raised or pointed the longer the entire process lasts.” Even a strong perception, though, is not powerful enough to rearrange the *entire* mind, “for, as a general rule, the ideas coming from within are, by virtue of their established connections, more potent than the single new percept.” So “the new perception takes the place that its relative importance demands, being made an acquisition of the older series of ideas. In other words, the new element of knowledge is adjusted into the system of ideas already in the mind, and is thus assimilated or apperceived” into the mental cathedral.¹¹¹

Herbart's notion of apperception explains the importance of interest and continuity in Herbartian thought. Regarding continuity, as the educational historian Harold Dunkel puts it, “since only similarity insures apperception [...] new objects of study must be similar to previous ones if instruction is to be effective.” Individual topics, therefore, were covered with “snaillike gradualism.”¹¹² Based on this theory of apperception, the Herbartians placed themselves in an unusual relationship to the “doctrine of interest” that child-study enthusiasts like G. Stanley Hall and Francis Parker were wielding against mental discipline, which stated that knowledge is only retained if it is acquired out of personal curiosity. The Herbartians, rather counterintuitively, defined the feeling of “interest” as nothing but a pleasant side effect of apperception. Therefore they held that interest could always be generated by a skilled teacher who knew the contours of her students' apperceptive masses; it was not for individual students to find any truly apperceived idea uninteresting. John Dewey summarizes the Herbartian notion of interest as follows:

When some idea is crowded below, or down toward, the threshold of consciousness, it strains against the counteracting ideas. The idea, having no force per se, becomes a force through pressure, and through the resistance of self-preservation it exerts against such pressure. In this forward and backward striving of the ideas some ideas fuse; the new and the old join hands. This fusion (the essence of apperception) gives a certain pleasure, the sense of ease, hence a peculiar kind of feeling, known as interest. The demand, not for any special idea, but for the repetition of the apperceptive process, for the repetition of this junction between new and old, is interest. It is the

111. De Garmo, Charles. *Herbart and the Herbartians*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896, pp. 34-35.

112. Dunkel, *Herbart and the Herbartians*, p. 219.

need to occupy itself further with the same activity.¹¹³

Thus, by identifying interest with learning in the abstract, the Herbartians were able to reconcile the doctrine of interest, originally a rallying cry for self-directed education, with the insistent demand for a clear curriculum with which superintendents and boards of education could convey specific bodies of knowledge.

The Herbartians also finessed the potential problem of indoctrination by defining every Herbartian lesson as an object lesson. Interest, they held, could not be generated by verbal propositions. Instead it always came in the form of what he called “presentations.” The apperceptive mass itself, in Herbart's abstruse psychological system, consisted of a number of perceived objects, each capable of acting upon (“perturbing”) the others in ways that could be observed but never strictly defined. Hence the only way to add new items to the apperceptive mass was to offer them up for observation, either directly or through the mediation of pictures or descriptions. Herbart called this process of wide-eyed direct encounter “aesthetic revelation”; he titled one of his pedagogical treatises *The Aesthetic Revelation of the World*.

The Herbartian lesson plan, whose specifics originate with Herbart's disciples, is designed in accordance with this model of apperception. In each of its five steps, the teacher consciously manages the apperceptive process:

- I. “Preparation” – Before introducing a new revelation, the teacher reminds students of the old ideas that will hopefully assimilate it.
- II. “Presentation” – The teacher unveils the revelation itself.
- III. “Assimilation,” also sometimes called “Comparison” and “Generalization”: The new revelation

113. Dewey, John. *Interest as Related to Will*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1899 (1895), p. 35.

is applied to the old ideas, confirming some and forcing the modification of others.

IV. “Application,” also sometimes called “Association”: The new revelation is applied to new ideas, thus demonstrating its generality.

V. “Recapitulation” (this step is sometimes omitted in Herbartian lesson plans): The teacher quickly revisits the first four steps to better establish the new arrangement of apperceptive masses.

Dozens of lessons following this format can be found in volumes like M. Fennell's *Lessons from the Herbartian Method* (1902). They cover topics ranging from “The Transitive and Intransitive Verbs” to “The Career of Oliver Cromwell,” “The Physical Features of Switzerland,” “The Mercurial Thermometer,” and “Quadratic Equations.” The book also includes Pestalozzi-style object lessons on such topics as “The Spider,” “The Horse,” and “Sugar.” Fennell's lessons are, unfortunately, all too long to reproduce here. For a condensed and readable contemporary account of a specific Herbartian lesson, we may return to John Dewey, who walks through one in *How We Think* (1910):

- I. Preparation: “When pupils take up the study of rivers, they are first questioned about streams or brooks with which they are already acquainted; if they have never seen any, they may be asked about water running in gutters. Somehow 'apperceptive masses' are stirred that will assist in getting hold of the new subject.”
- II. Presentation: “Pictures and relief models of rivers are shown; vivid oral descriptions are given; if possible, the children are taken to see an actual river.”
- III. Generalization: “The local river is compared with, perhaps, the Amazon, the St. Lawrence, the Rhine; by this comparison accidental and unessential features are eliminated and the river concept is formed: the elements involved in the river-meaning are gathered together and

formulated.”

IV. Application: “The resulting principle is fixed in mind and is clarified by being applied to other streams, say to the Thames, the Po, the Connecticut.”

V. (Dewey omits Recapitulation.)¹¹⁴

One recurring feature of Herbartian lessons, seen here in the first step, is the act of drawing ideas from the class (much as Cahan hoped to draw ideas from his readership with the *Bintel Brief*). Ostensibly, drawing from the class is a way to ensure that the course of the lesson is dictated by the students' interests. The line between the teacher drawing out an answer and suggesting it herself could be quite thin, however. In the Application step of Fennell's lesson on Cromwell, the teacher is told to “Draw from class that, though Cromwell succeeded in acquiring power, it did not make him happy, because not lawfully acquired.”¹¹⁵ Fennell disregards the possibility that, for example, the class has anarchistic political views and is critical of legal structures. More realistically, Fennell implicitly encourages the teacher to elicit a variety of responses and then positively reinforce the ones that conform to Fennell's own apparent law-and-order sensibilities, all the while treating these sensibilities as coming from the class rather than from herself. By acting as though the lesson is adjusted to the students, she pressures the students into adjusting to the lesson, in subtler and more effective ways than the teachers at the VTTI could have imagined.

We are now in a position to appreciate the convergence between Cahan's journalism and Herbart's pedagogy. It is probably unnecessary to explain how the “Proletarishker Maggid” and the *Bintel Brief* conform to the Herbartian lesson plan, as the *Forward* does generally. The connection can be underscored with one more example, in which Cahan explicitly states his intention to tailor his lessons

114. Dewey, John. *How We Think*. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1910, pp. 202-03.

115. Fennell, M. *Notes of Lessons from the Herbartian Method*. London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1902, p. 108.

for his readership in the interests of bringing them around to his own totalizing vision of the world. In 1910, Cahan wrote a two-volume history of the United States to be offered as a premium for *Forward* subscribers. *From the Old World to the New* was, like so much of his work, a deliberately slanted popularization of serious scholarship. In his introduction to the first volume, he argues that the discovery of America had changed the Old World as well as the New, by opening new markets, making new resources available, and spurring scientific, economic, and political innovations, including modern capitalism itself. So, Cahan reasons, one must know European history in order to understand the global significance of America. By extension, one must understand the role that European Jews had played in finance, colonization, and other transatlantic activities. Cahan recognizes that a general-interest book on the age of discovery would justifiably pay scant attention to the Jewish angle, but he defends doing so in a book for a Jewish audience: “We have, perhaps, given the Jews in this work a larger share than is strictly proportional. We have committed this offence because certain details, through the special interest that they hold for the Jewish reader, will in his thoughts lend the period more color. Because of the pieces of Jewish history, our reader will understand the period of time with which this deals, and the personalities which moved about the historical landscape, more clearly and vividly.”¹¹⁶

Rafael Na'arizokh as a Herbartian Bildungsroman

Though as a novelist Cahan is most often identified with *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which is certainly his most ambitious and accomplished work, one could argue that, from Cahan's own point of view at least, the didactic novella *Vi Azoy Rafael Na'arizokh Is Gevorn a Sozialist* was even more central to his literary career. (It seems to me that there are three causes of the relative neglect of *Rafael Na'arizokh*: it is not as stylistically or narratively sophisticated as Cahan's later work; it is so baldly

116. Quoted in Shell and Sollors, *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, p. 375.

political that it is likely to repel many readers; and it has never been translated from the original Yiddish.) *Rafael Na'arizokh* began as a serial that ran in the *Arbeiter Tseitung* from June of 1894 through October of 1899. After the serialized version ended, Cahan enlarged it and brought it out as an eighty-page pamphlet. He continued to add to it through a total of six editions, the last of which, clocking in at 199 pages, was published by the *Forward* Association in 1917, the same year that *David Levinsky* appeared.¹¹⁷ After *David Levinsky*, for reasons that we will explore below, Cahan gave up literature altogether; he was working on *Rafael Na'arizokh* for the whole duration of his literary career.

Like much of Cahan's Yiddish output, *Rafael Na'arizokh* is earnest socialist propaganda. Rafael is a carpenter in the Russian village of Krulitz, who loves to invent simple machines that make his work easier. When the Russian economy takes a downturn, Rafael and his wife move to New York, and Rafael gets a job in a furniture factory whose labor-saving machinery delights him. Soon, however, he sees a troubling paradox: even though New York carpenters produce much more than carpenters in Krulitz, they earn less money and have less control over their work. Rafael racks his brain and determines that the problem is not the machines but their owners. He grinds his way through various problems related to the ownership of the means of production, and eventually has his epiphany when, lacking the cash for train fare, he walks across the publicly owned Brooklyn Bridge. Public ownership of everything, he concludes, is the only just arrangement in an industrial society. Rafael works out a home-brewed version of socialism, and only then discovers a socialist meeting in his neighborhood. At the meeting, he meets a cafe intellectual, Vicker, who listens to his ideas and patiently redescribes them in standard socialist terms. Thrilled that he is part of a glorious movement, Rafael becomes a happier man and a better husband.¹¹⁸

As a work of pedagogy, *Rafael Na'arizokh* follows something like the Herbartian five steps of

117. The fullest discussion of the chronology of *Rafael Na'arizokh* is Pollock, *Solitary Clarinetist*, pp. 195-96.

118. Cahan, Abraham. *Vi azoy Rafael Naarizokh is gevoren a sotsialist*. New York: Forward Association, 1907. All translations from this text are my own.

instruction. The novella's first section, which takes place in Krulitz, might be described, from the reader's point of view, as the “preparation” step of the lesson. A familiar, integral mental universe is summoned up as Cahan introduces his everyman and his typical *shtetl* life in the village of Krulitz. We see Rafael in his carpentry shop, where he happily sings his favorite tune, the *Na'arizokh* (a liturgical melody), which he embellishes with “ingenious cantorly flourishes” as he sets his “whole body” to work chiseling, planing, and polishing. We see him at the synagogue, at the tavern, and walking the country roads. We even see him henpecked by his wife, Sarah-Gitl, whose colorful kvetching provides comic relief throughout the novella. Rafael's life is, if not uniformly blissful, at least meaningful and coherent. This self-enclosed world is precarious, however, because Krulitz is actually a part of larger systems, as Rafael discovers when the whole region sinks into economic depression. Henceforth he will have to rethink all of his old-time assumptions.

When Rafael emigrates to New York, the “presentation” step can be said to commence as he is gradually introduced to American conditions. He sees new machines and assimilates them into his prior understanding of carpentry, assuming that their use to him in New York will be the same as it might have been in Krulitz. Once again, though, he is caught unawares by the complexity of large systems, and finds himself earning less than he did in Krulitz despite producing more, and having less free time. He grows miserable, and stops singing his *Na'arizokh*. Six months pass in which he puzzles over the gap between rich and poor, which had been a non-issue in Krulitz. His first explanation is machinery itself, but he soon decides that machines themselves are not the problem, but rather the fact that they are owned by one person and operated by another. His mind races through increasingly large-scale solutions. He could buy his own machine, but one machine by itself was not very useful. He would need many machines. But one worker could never afford all those machines, so many workers would have to hammer out some kind of shared ownership arrangement. Even if such a cooperative factory took off, however, it could never compete with companies that exploited their workers and used their

size to push smaller competitors out of the market. Are machines ultimately harmful? Do they only cause poverty and suck the joy out of work? This process of casting about for the real significance of machinery is roughly analogous to the Herbartian “generalization” step, in which, in Dewey's words, “unessential features are eliminated and the [...] concept is formed.” The generalization can be said to conclude when Rafael is fortuitously reminded of the private train line and the public Brooklyn Bridge; he then realizes that the only way that humanity can coexist with machinery is to institute cooperative ownership of the means of production, so that gains in efficiency will translate into a higher standard of living for all. The concept now fixed, Rafael happily sings the *Marseillaise*, his new song of himself, and is ready to learn from the socialist intellectual Vicker, who shows him that his ideas are consistent with the theory of evolution and can be extended to include a critique of male chauvinism. The Vicker sections resemble the Herbartian “application” step, in which the concept is brought to bear on examples other than those that generated it. It is, of course, doubtful that Cahan had the five Herbartian steps in mind when he wrote *Rafael Na'arizokh*, but they are, after all, merely names for some aspects of object-lesson pedagogy which are bound to recur wherever that technique is used.

Rafael proceeds by trying to reconcile simple but unsettling observations with his own sense of personal integrity, and his education ends when his “circle of thought” is once again complete. First there is the *Na'arizokh*, then there is the problem of the machine, and finally there is the *Marseillaise*. At the end of his educational journey, a man asks Rafael why he should become a socialist. Will it put money in his pockets or improve his lot in the afterlife? No, Rafael responds; socialism “makes one neither richer nor more pious, but more of a man.” His path to this “ideal of Man's humanity” (to recall Schiller's phrase) is quite different from that of Wilhelm Meister. Whereas Rafael begins with a small kind of integrity and moves gradually toward a larger kind, Wilhelm, following the Schillerian template for aesthetic education, begins with a sense of his own inner discord and seeks an exemplar who can model a truly harmonious life. He encounters many possible exemplars, each of whom present their

own highly elaborated vision of a fully human life: his friend Werner, for whom commerce is a communion with the energies and appetites of humanity; his romantic rival Serlo, for whom the theater is a chance to explore all possible personalities; the widow Theresa, for whom improvement of the land is an embodiment of the order that humanity imposes on nature; the nameless Beautiful Soul, for whom pious renunciation is the transcendence of transitory passions; and, finally, the Society of the Tower, whose vision of an aesthetic state he accepts. Wilhelm is always dealing with ultimate questions about the meaning of his life. Rafael never sees such ultimates, only concrete objects and concrete problems, through which he chews with Dunkel's "snaillike gradualism."

Despite these differences, *Rafael Na'arizokh* and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* share a preoccupation with delivering a moral education that deprives its recipient of any grounds for disagreement. They both do so by eschewing propositional statements of morality, and even dubious parable-making in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished. Instead they call attention to their subject's feelings of incomplete humanness and dangle before them objective "presentations" which, once integrated into the subject's sense of himself, will leave him feeling more human, or, in other words, more himself, than before. In both texts, the appeal of the object lesson is that it is unobjectionable. Though Goethe and Cahan understand the twinned ideals of aesthetic experience and full humanity quite differently, they both attempt to conflate these ideals because of shared anxieties about building a common culture in a democratic environment in which everyone is entitled to her own opinion. Beneath the superficial diversity of preferences, they both assume, there is always a fundamental preference for a fully human life, about which everyone sufficiently immersed in aesthetic experience will ultimately agree.

"A Film of Irritation": Cahan's Tragic Fiction

While *Rafael Na'arizokh* represents the high-water mark of Cahan's socialist pedagogy, much of his English fiction reflects his reservations about that pedagogy. Others had their reservations too: Cahan's strategy of spreading socialism by appealing only to his readers' existing interests drew criticism from several quarters. Some disgruntled *Forward* staffers accused Cahan of being a workplace autocrat who did not live up to the ideal of a democratic exchange of perspectives on which he had insisted when he returned to the paper in 1902. The Yiddish short-story writer Lamed Shapiro, who worked on the *Forward* in 1907, recalls that Cahan often declared, "I don't need any writers here, only 'hands.'" ¹¹⁹ Cahan believed (probably correctly) that if the paper were not firmly controlled by a single individual, then it would have to be run by a committee which would inevitably split into rival ideological factions. Only by giving Cahan the unilateral power to decide what socialism was could the *Forward* maintain the open dialogue with its readers exemplified by the *Bintel Brief*. This, at any rate, was Cahan's side of the story.

As we have already seen, the most zealous opponents of Cahan's plan were other socialists, above all the De Leonists, who wanted the socialist press to be more doctrinally sophisticated. Their criticisms were echoed by intellectuals (some socialist, others not) who deplored the lack of serious reading material in the *Forward*. These intellectuals objected to the paper's single-minded focus on popularization. In 1908 the literary critic Shmuel Niger complained that in the Yiddish press in general, literature was not valued as an end in itself, but only "as a device for educating the Jewish masses or advancing one or another Jewish ideology." If Jewish intellectuals spent all their time dumbing down existing ideas for the public, then who would generate new ideas? "The dissemination of culture becomes the goal of an intelligentsia only when it despairs of its own creativity," he declared; "when intellectuals lose sight of their highest goal, cultural creativity, they become enamored of a surrogate goal, cultural dissemination." In 1910, Hayim Zhitlovsky condensed Niger's point into a memorable

119. Quoted in Harap, Louis. *The Image of the Jew in American Literature: From Early Republic to Mass Immigration*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974, p. 490.

zinger: “Cahan doesn’t seem to realize that in order to popularize one must first have knowledge.”

Zhitlovsky feared that the Lower East Side would suffer brain drain because of Cahan's hostility to anything that might seem abstruse. “We must create an atmosphere which will provide the Jewish intellectual with as excellent fare as he obtains in other tongues,” he argued. “Otherwise, he will abandon us, and leave us with nothing but *melamdim* [teachers of young children].”. Zhitlovsky had a point, at least as far as the *Forward* was concerned: according to Irving Howe, serious intellectuals preferred the *Tageblatt*, a stiff-necked religious paper that did not “flatte[n] out” its articles for uneducated readers. A choice had to be made, these intellectuals argued, between rigor and breadth of appeal.¹²⁰

The Russian intellectuals who were Cahan's lifelong models did not face this choice in the same way that Cahan did. Because of the abject ignorance of the Russian working class, popularization would have been hopeless. The Russian cultural elite had nobody to talk to but itself. Therefore, as Cahan explained in his essay on “The Younger Russian Writers,” Russian magazines had no reason not make their standards as high as possible:

Upon the whole, the fiction printed in the Russian magazines is of an unusually high order. This would not be the case, perhaps, if the magazine-reading public in Russia were as large as it is in countries where education is much more evenly distributed than it is in the dominions of the Czar. But the Russian monthlies cater to a small, intellectual minority -- the circulation of the *Messenger of Europe*, the best-established magazine in St. Petersburg, is, according to its own figures, from 7,000 to 8,000 -- and the average of tastes they have to deal with is exceedingly high.¹²¹

As a young intellectual with no premonition of his American future, Cahan would have expected to do the sort of writing found in these elite journals. But the glory of Russian journalism was paid for with a price of its own: many in the Russian literary elite wanted a more democratic culture and disliked being

120. Quotations from Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, pp. 504-08.

121. Cahan, “Younger Russian Writers,” p. 128.

confined to their little niche, despite its amenities. Cahan seems to have thought that intellectuals like Niger and Zhitlovsky were indulging in nostalgia for this sort of harmless but homey cloister where democracy was more theory than fact.

And yet he shared their nostalgia. Describing the wave of Russian Jewish intellectuals who emigrated to America, Cahan writes in *Bleter* that besides introducing Manhattan to a new Yiddish dialect, “In our hearts we also brought our love for enlightened Russian culture. We had transported from Russia the banner of idealism, scarred and bloodstained in the Russian revolutionary movement.” Cahan sees a parallel, or even an identity, between the insular culture of the Russian intelligentsia and the revolutionary fervor of the underground terrorists. Both the intelligentsia and the terrorists were in a position to do high-minded things *for* the people, but not *with* them. For both, change was effected by heroic individuals seeing through the big lies of Tsarism and taking matters into their own hands, often at the risk of exile or death. Cahan shared this mentality when he arrived in Manhattan in 1882. As we have seen, he began to think differently as he got better acquainted with American democracy. Nonetheless, his identity had been forged in the Russian crucible, and he found it difficult to admit that he would never become a martyred truth-teller or bomb-thrower. “The power of deeply rooted beliefs is greater than the power of logic and common sense,” he ruefully admits. “Socialism itself teaches that the special circumstances of each time and each place must be taken into account in formulating tactics. But the romantic stimulation of danger is powerful. If all is permissible and danger is absent, socialism becomes diluted and revolutionary heroism becomes impossible.”¹²² Heroism, for the young Cahan, had been the natural sign of authenticity. He struggled with the siren song of heroism throughout his career, but on an intellectual level he never succumbed to it (however he may have comported himself around the Forward offices). That struggle took a severe emotional toll on him. As Irving Howe puts it, “There is a certain Litvak dryness to Cahan's Yiddish, as there is to his memories, indeed to his very

122. Cahan, *Education of Abraham Cahan*, pp. 225, 228.

soul. He seems to have felt that to allow himself spontaneity of expression might threaten the role he had chosen as mentor of immigrants and guide into the new world.”¹²³ In a 1902 *Forward* column, Cahan discusses this feeling of dryness. As a young man, he writes, he imagined “How terrible my life would be if my idea did not continue to glow!” Now, years later, he thinks, “Oh! But now I am a practical man; I am no longer a greenhorn. [...] I know that I am right in being like this, that twenty years ago I was too green, but nevertheless [...] I yearn for my greenness of old. I yearn for my yearnings of twenty years ago.”¹²⁴

Was there some way that Cahan could have preserved his high-flying idealism, instead of trading it in for the delicate and often unpleasant balancing act of popularization? Would it really have been so bad, for instance, to become another Niger or Zhitlovsky? Or even another De Leon? Put differently, would life have been any better if he abandoned Herbartianism? This, I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, was among the most important themes of Cahan's English-language fiction. As we have seen, Cahan's preference for the Yiddish “mama gab” stemmed from his vision of socialist pedagogy. His Yiddish output, both journalistic and fictional, furthered that vision, including the “Proletarishker Maggid,” his 1895 short story “Mottke Arbel and His Romance” (an allegory about the self-defeating nature of acquisitiveness), *Rafael Na'arizokh*, and the *Bintel Brief*. When Cahan wrote in English, however, he had different goals. Aside from work that appeared in book form, Cahan's English output was published in relatively high-toned venues such as the *Commercial Advertiser*, *Short Story* magazine, *Scribner's*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. His target audience, in other words, was genteel. Why would Cahan care to write for such readers? He seems to have had two more or less independent reasons; some of his work reflects one reason, some the other, and some both. The first reason was that he hoped to improve relations between Jews and gentiles by writing local-color fiction about the Lower East Side that would make its inhabitants seem interesting and at least somewhat sympathetic. This was

123. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 527.

124. Quoted in Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, pp. 267-68.

the impulse behind stories such as “Rabbi Eliezer's Christmas,” an 1899 tale about an impoverished rabbi who has mixed feelings about receiving charity from Christians. *Yekl* and *The Rise of David Levinsky*, both of which were written in English and then translated into Yiddish, also served this function.

The second reason was that he wanted an outlet in which to explore the frustrated high-Russian idealism that he kept so hermetically sealed from his socialist identity. From Cahan's perspective, the *Atlantic* was, among other things, a kind of surrogate *Messenger of Europe*. In English he could discuss the fate of high culture in America with other people who wondered about the same thing; he could never have brought himself to have that discussion in the *Forward*. As Alice Nakhimovsky has noted, many of Cahan's English stories feature characters who are absorbed in a cultural pursuit that isolates them from their communities: she cites Shaya (a Talmud prodigy who treats learning as a sport) and Flora (his piano-playing American bride) from “The Imported Bridegroom” (1898), and Tatyana Markovna (a young woman obsessed with Russian magazines) from “Circumstances” (1898).¹²⁵ These characters are not counterbalanced by others who successfully integrate high-cultural tastes with American life. Many characters in Cahan's English fiction get ahead by getting educated, but their education is more on the immediately practical side. Cahan feared that there was no place for a true intellectual in America.

Some such fear can first be detected in *Yekl* (1896). In *Rafael Na'arizokh* Rafael learns that if he wants to live a life of beauty and dignity he must work to establish socialism in America. *Yekl* points in a different direction. “Jake,” né Yekl, is a recent immigrant who prides himself on his knowledge of baseball, horse racing, boxing, and above all dancing. He works in a Lower East Side sweatshop, trying to save money to pay for his wife and son's passage to America. Instead he spends all of his money on clothes and amusements. He is ashamed of his profligacy, but he is also ashamed when he thinks of

125. Nakhimovsky, Alice. “The Russian-Yiddish-English Writer Abraham Cahan.” *East European Jewish Affairs* 38:2 (2008), 159-167.

bringing his wife to America, for while he has become a dandy, he knows that she is still old-fashioned and would not understand his new American ways. He eventually sends for her, but then he quickly divorces her and marries Mamie, a flashy Americanized girl he knows from the dance hall. We last see Jake wracked with guilt and uncertainty, on his way to City Hall for his new marriage license. He seems destined for unhappiness.

As Ronald Sanders has pointed out, *Yekl* is no socialist morality play. Jake makes decent money and actually enjoys his work. His problem is that, though he is quick to become infatuated, he seems to be incapable of sustaining a loving relationship. He scorns women who are too “green” but cannot imagine a long-term relationship with a woman who has become as shallow, selfish, and hedonistic as he has under the influence of American culture. As Sanders observes, “It is not specifically the dollar that is corrupting in this novel, but something that it represents. The corrupting force seems to be nothing less than America itself [...] we are passing beyond the realm of didactic fable into that of tragedy.”¹²⁶ Sanders is certainly correct, although it is difficult to put one's finger on just what it is about America that makes happiness impossible. One plausible answer is that it is cheap entertainment, or *shund*. Jake is so hungry for constant stimulation that he loses sight of the sources of enduring value in his life, such as his wife and son. Another is the deterioration of the religious community; Jake stops going to temple before the novel's action begins. A third possibility might be relaxed sexual norms, which permit the mixed dances where Jake falls for Mamie. Or perhaps the driver is the cultural imperative to conspicuously consume. Cahan takes all of these possibilities seriously in *Yekl* and his other English fiction, but never identifies one or another of them as more salient than the others.

Cahan left the causes of Jake's unhappiness ambiguous because it was overdetermined. First, of course, because all of the potentially “corrupting” elements of American life were interrelated. But perhaps more importantly because he thought, at least when he was in a certain mood, that unhappiness

126. Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 198.

was an inescapable part of the human condition. Cahan expressed that mood most clearly in “Tzinchadzi of the Catskills,” a 1901 story that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The narrator is a comfortably established Jewish immigrant on vacation in the Catskills, where he meets a circus performer named Tzinchadzi who tells him his life story. Tzinchadzi grew up in the Caucasus mountains, where his people saw horsemanship as the measure of a man. There he had challenged a rival named Azdeck to a riding contest for the hand of the beautiful Zelaya. Tzinchadzi vanquished Azdeck and imperiously claimed Zelaya. But Zelaya was repulsed by his cold-hearted arrogance – “You are without a heart,” she told Tzinchadzi – and she chose to marry Azdeck. Crushed, Tzinchadzi moves to America, where after decades he still gnashes his teeth for Zelaya. After hearing his tale the narrator persuades Tzinchadzi that there is no use keeping the fire of his youthful romantic idealism alive, since it will lead to nothing and only cause him pain. Tzinchadzi reluctantly agrees, and they part. They meet again, six years later, on a ferryboat in New York. The scene is set by symbols of broken spirit: the narrator is “watching the splinters of a shattered bar of sunshine on the water, and listening to the consumptive notes of a negro's fiddle.” Tzinchadzi is now “Jones,” a successful real-estate man (this career often represents, for Cahan, the ultimate in parasitic profiteering). Tzinchadzi confesses that while on the surface his life is fine, he is now nostalgic, not for the Caucasus, but for the Catskills. “I have money and I have friends, but you want to know whether I am happy; and that I am not, sir,” he says. “Why? Because I yearn neither for Zelaya, nor for anything else. I have thought it all out, and I have come to the conclusion that a man's heart cannot be happy unless it has somebody or something to yearn for. [...] I can't tell you what I feel. Maybe if I could I shouldn't feel it, and there would be nothing to tell, so that the telling of it would be a lie.” Tzinchadzi forecasts, almost verbatim, Cahan's 1902 complaint, “I yearn for my yearnings of twenty years ago.”

In Cahan's 1902 lament, his idealism was too “green,” too incompatible with American life. Tzinchadzi, however, preserves his idealism in America for years. Ultimately, he gives it up because it

causes him too much pain, although in hindsight that pain was preferable to the spiritual deadness that replaced it. He tells the narrator that there was “a wound in me at that time, and the wound rankled with bitters mixed with sweets. Yes, sir. My heart ached, but its pain was pleasure, whereas now alas ! The pain is gone, and with it my happiness. I have nothing, nothing!”¹²⁷ In sum, if lost idealism is an indictment of America in the 1902 *Forward* feature, in “Tzinchadzi” it is a universal human tragedy that springs from a too-pure idealism's inherent tendency to isolate one from other people. Tzinchadzi's devotion to the ideal of the conquering horseman made him seem to be “without a heart,” even though he was, in a way, a passionate man. For him, this ideal was a self-evident end in itself; his mistake was assuming that others construed it the same way and valued it as highly as he did. Tzinchadzi's failure with Zelaya, we might say, illustrates what happens at the end of the process in which, in the name of purity, one shrinks the audience to which one holds one's ideals accountable, from the public as a whole to an intellectual cloister to oneself alone. If we, like Tzinchadzi in the Catskills, or like a Lower East Side anarchist, want to keep our ideals pure, eventually we will have nobody with whom to talk about them except ourselves. (“If I could [tell you how I feel] I shouldn't feel it, and there would be nothing to tell, so that the telling of it would be a lie.”) It is fitting, then, that so many of Cahan's mature English stories, the stories he wrote for the cloister, make this shrinking process their central theme. He wanted to talk about his tortured private idealism with others who might feel similarly. For Cahan, literature could be a powerful tool for bringing people together, as in his Yiddish work; but it could also bear witness to people's inevitable apartness, as in his English work. If the English work is, on balance, the more sophisticated, it may be because, as Irving Howe writes, “only in the theme of unfulfillment does [Cahan's] literary gift fulfill itself.”¹²⁸ *The Rise of David Levinsky*, to which we now turn, is the full expression of that unfulfillment.

127. Cahan, *Grandma Never Lived in America*, pp. 234-39.

128. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 527.

The Rise of David Levinsky as a Life Unlived

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan imagines what his life might have been like had he been more like the manically logical Shaya or the lovelorn Tzinchadzi, and less like the attentive but increasingly aimless “Esteemed Editor” of the *Bintel Brief*. A thematic sequel to “Tzinchadzi of the Catskills” and “The Imported Bridegroom,” *David Levinsky* is Cahan's most patient and searching appraisal of the life of someone never concedes that, as Cahan had written earlier about his break with anarchism, “varying circumstances must be taken into account.” By 1917 Cahan had endured over two decades of being told that he was taking them into account too much. He stood accused of becoming, in pedagogical terms, more of a child-centered Montessorian than he should have, in his zeal to avoid becoming too much of a curriculum-centered Administrative Progressive. He had hoped there was a happy medium that was equal parts democratic and intellectually rigorous, but such a thing could only exist if the typical uneducated citizen and the far-seeing intellectual could talk productively with each other. It had worked with Rafael and Vicker, but what if Rafael had been more like Yekl and Vicker had been more like Shaya? What if the gaps between student and teacher was simply too wide? They are for Levinsky, who never stops marveling at the shocking “discrepancies” that exist not only between Americans, but also within their private mental lives. Levinsky, like Tzinchadzi, swings recklessly between an untenable idealism and an unfeeling philistinism. But while Tzinchadzi's lost idealism can never be recovered, the fanatically tenacious Levinsky is doomed to lose and recover his over and over again.

For Herbart, and for the Cahan of *Rafael Na'arizokh*, the highest ideals were natural outgrowths of everyday desires, once these desires had been fully squared with one another. In his youth, encouraged by the conventions of *shtetl* life, David Levinsky internalizes a world-view diametrically opposed to this one, in which a vast gulf is fixed between the everyday and the ideal, and anything that gratifies the

former must profane the latter. He maintains this attitude long after he grows up and leaves the *shtetl*, no matter how much his circumstances change. We might give several reasons for this inflexibility. In “David Levinsky: The Jew as American Millionaire,” a 1962 essay that remains one of the most influential interpretations of Cahan's novel, Isaac Rosenfeld gives two good ones. Diasporic Judaism, Rosenfeld argues, encourages a mood of perpetual yearning for a lost holy land, to the point that one cannot think of the ideal in any other way: “the yearning itself is Jerusalem,” as he puts it. So perhaps Levinsky is simply a representative “Diaspora Man.” And, Rosenfeld goes on, in *David Levinsky* the psychology of the Diaspora Man is buttressed by the Protestant work ethic, in which striving for financial success is praiseworthy but enjoying its fruits is not.¹²⁹ Another reason is that, like Jim Burden (see Chapter Two), Levinsky's idealism is inseparable from his arrested emotional development, because he makes it into a compensation for the loss of a nurturing parent. Finally, some critics, such as Louis Harap, read Levinsky as deeply cynical: a version of idealism that has nothing to say about the workaday world seems like a suspiciously convenient creed for the sort of malefactor of great wealth that Levinsky eventually becomes.¹³⁰ So, though no one of these reasons would be sufficient to explain Levinsky, a combination of religious, social, and psychosexual factors all seem to play a role. Whatever the causes of Levinsky's habit of treating the real and the ideal as opposites, my argument here is that Cahan was mostly interested in its effects, and specifically whether it led to the fulfillment that he failed to find in his own life, having pursued the opposite course. We will first trace the general outlines of Levinsky's idealism, and then follow the series of dialectical reversals by which it becomes purely melancholic.

During his youth in the village of Antomir, Levinsky's idealism is directed toward his mother and his religion. Levinsky is an only child whose father died when he was almost too young to remember

129. Rosenfeld, Isaac. “David Levinsky: The Jew as American Millionaire.” *Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader*, ed. Mark Schechner. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988, pp. 157-59.

130. Harap, *Image of the Jew*, p. 487.

him, so his mother is his whole family. She spoils young David as best she can considering the grinding poverty in which they live. She never whips him, because she feels that the world has already punished him enough. She is so protective, in fact, that she eventually gets herself killed while trying to avenge injuries her son suffered from a gang of anti-semitic village toughs. It is fitting that she gives her life to defend Levinsky's Jewishness, because she is very pious and hopes that he will grow up to become a great Talmudic scholar, which is among the highest ambitions to which he could aspire. She goes hungry in order to send him to better *cheders* (grammar schools) and to feed him while he studies in the *bes medresh* (a prayer house where Jewish men gather on an informal basis to study religious lore). Levinsky's sense of his own religiosity becomes inextricable from his love for his mother. For the rest of his life, his idealism will manifest itself in the worship of either God or a faultless woman, and the two will often be difficult to tell apart.

From this early experience Levinsky also retains a habit of locating the ideal in specific places that are set off from the world, as the *cheders*, the *bes medresh*, and the synagogue are. After many years in New York, he starts to think that Antomir itself, as a whole, is the home of ideals that America cannot sustain. At other times, like Shaya of "The Imported Bridegroom," he transfers the scholarly aspect of his Jewish identity into the secular sphere, and calls City College "My Temple." Those places that are not houses of the ideal become houses of sin, or at best of amoral hedonism and acquisitiveness. In Antomir, there is a street frequented by prostitutes that Levinsky's mother forbids him to visit, explaining only that it is a "sinful" street. Later, as an industrial tycoon, he goes through phases in which he refuses to believe that anything of moral importance can happen in his factories, which are merely the stages on which the Darwinian struggle for survival plays itself out. During these phases Levinsky transfers his idealism to the wholesome domestic spaces in which one or another of his idealized lady-loves lives.

In addition to being physically set off from the world, Levinsky's idealism, at least at first, sharply

divides his mind or soul from his body. The prostitutes' street is Levinsky's first encounter with the idea of sin. A scene in which the young Levinsky, just on the cusp of sexual awakening, attends his first wedding, illustrates the starkness with which Cahan's novel contrasts the ideal and the sexual. Watching the bride and groom, Levinsky recalls, he felt that "The ceremony was a poem to me, something inexpressibly beautiful and sacred." When his more worldly friend Naphtali makes a sexual joke at the couple's expense, "I relished the discovery and I relished the deviltry of it. But the poem vanished. The beauty of the wedding I had just witnessed, and of weddings in general, seemed to be irretrievably desecrated." These are but the first of many instances in which sin is equated with sex (though, as we shall see, Levinsky is not essentially a prude). The ideal is also associated, for Levinsky, with other kinds of askesis: he endures pinching and slapping at the hands of his *cheder* teachers, and hunger at the *bes medresh*. The further removed he is from physical hardship, in fact, the weaker his idealism becomes. After his mother dies, he takes advantage of a custom known as *esn tog* (eating days), in which poor Talmud students are invited to dine, once a week on a given day, with local families, such that a student with seven eating days would never go hungry. His mother's sacrifice makes Levinsky a hero, and he collects the full complement of *esn tage*. But without having his mother to impress, and without the stimulus of hunger, his zeal for religious study starts to wane. "My former interest in the Talmud was gone," he reflects. "Now that I did not want for food, my sense of loneliness became keener than ever. [...] Life was devoid of savor."¹³¹

Levinsky finds that these qualities of isolation and askesis are practically sufficient in themselves to sustain his idealism, which he is then free to transfer to various un-Orthodox spheres. During the period in which he dreams of attending City College, he reflects that "My old religion had gradually fallen to pieces, and if its place was taken by something else, if there was something that appealed to the better man in me, to what was purest in my thoughts and most sacred in my emotions, that

131. Cahan, Abraham. *The Rise of David Levinsky*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1993 (1917), pp. 14, 59.

something was the red, church-like structure on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-Third Street.” When he prepares for college by studying math textbooks, he muses that “some unknown fellow who took pleasure in teasing me and daring me to find him” hides inside every problem. “It was the same mischievous fellow, in fact, who used to laugh in my face when I had a difficult bit of Talmud to unravel.” Levinsky's frequent comparisons of his secular cultural aspirations with his Talmud studies invite us to see his fleeting passions for humanized Judaism, Victorian literature, mathematics, and the theater, among other things, as transformations, not abandonments, of his earliest idealistic impulses.¹³²

All of these secular interests reflect Levinsky's desire for a world apart from the everyday, as is especially apparent in Levinsky's aesthetic ideas, which are surprisingly important to him. Unsurprisingly, he is an ardent anti-realist, and makes just the sorts of critical arguments that Cahan most relished attacking. In his early New York years Levinsky is devoted to Madam Klesmer, an actress who “speak[s] like a prophetess in ancient Israel” even though this delivery is “unnatural” for her character, a modern Russian girl. Her oracular tone is “just why I liked it,” he reflects. “I thought it perfectly proper that people on the stage should not talk as they would off the stage. I thought that this unnatural speech of theirs was one of the principal things an audience paid for.” Cahan makes some elaborate jokes at the expense of Levinsky's aesthetic ideas, one of which might be worth reconstructing. At one point Levinsky takes up Victorian literature, and mentally compares Dickens with Thackeray. He finds Thackeray's realism banal, for “It seemed to me that anybody in command of bookish English ought to be able to turn out a work like *Vanity Fair*, where men and things were so simple and so natural that they impressed me like people and things I had known.” This, of course, is a good description of Cahan's own approach to literature. Dickens, meanwhile, impresses Levinsky as a kind of god to be worshiped, whose novels are “so full of extraordinary characters, unexpected wit,

132. Ibid., pp. 169-70.

outbursts of beautiful rhetoric, and other wonderful things, that their author appealed to me as something more than a human being.” So far this all comports well with Levinsky's notion of the higher things in life. But Cahan has Levinsky confess that, for no reason that he can explain, “deep down in my heart I enjoyed Thackeray more than I did Dickens.” Cahan is still maintaining the idea, set forth in the “Realism” essay, that taste is grounded in unvarying aspects of human psychology, and that people whose tastes differ from his are in denial.¹³³

Dickens and Madam Klesmer sustain Levinsky's spirit during his hard times as a laborer. Eventually, however, Levinsky makes his fortune, and feels an indifference reminiscent of his *esn tog* days. Finally free from the hardships that had always spurred his idealism, he finds himself the source of others' hardship, as he crushes unions and rival manufacturers. At this point he turns to the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer. If Madam Klesmer expresses his hope that, while daily life seemed to be drearily “Russian,” the bliss of “Israel” was still attainable, Spencer convinces him that “Israel” is merely an inverted “Russia,” that hardship is not the opposite of, but the essence of, the ideal. Reading an editorial which “derived its inspiration from the theory of the Struggle for Existence and the Survival of the Fittest,” Levinsky feels that he holds “a work of love” in his hands, and dives into *Social Statics*, *The Origin of Species*, and *The Descent of Man*.¹³⁴ Conveniently, he has this revelation only when he is personally protected from any kind of material suffering. Soon, however, he finds that Spencerism is rather thin gruel. He discovers its limitations on a visit to a Catskills resort, where people are at leisure and their motivations are (at least at first blush) unconnected with its iron laws of competition. He rekindles his love of literature, and makes a short-winded attempt to bone up on Hebrew poetry. When he becomes disillusioned with the poet that he worships (and also is cast off by the poet's daughter, whom he has been courting), he gives up on poetry too.

133. Ibid., pp. 161, 165.

134. Ibid., p. 282.

Having at this point exhausted every form that his sort of idealism could take (except, oddly, for anarchism itself, the thing for which, I'm arguing, it most directly stands), Levinsky reflects, in the novel's final pages, that "my sense of triumph is coupled with a brooding sense of emptiness and insignificance, of my lack of anything like a great, deep interest." He implicitly links this sense of boredom with his inability to modify the world-view of his youth. "When I take a look at my inner identity," says Levinsky in the novel's celebrated opening paragraph, "it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance." It is only natural that someone who believes that everything meaningful stands above and opposed to everything relating to comfort and pleasure would find "worldly happiness" to be dust and ashes.¹³⁵

This general account of Levinsky's failed idealism probably suffices to illustrate that *The Rise of David Levinsky* can profitably be read as a repudiation of the anarchist or De Leonist paths that Cahan declined to take in his own life. This interpretation of the novel also throws some light on a number of details that have not been adequately treated by its critics, especially concerning Levinsky's various love interests. In fact, each step in the dialectical evolution of Levinsky's idealism corresponds quite neatly with a failed love affair. In the remainder of this chapter we will flesh out this evolution.

Levinsky offers the reader a helpful rubric for understanding his relationships with women. As a child in Antomir, he identifies "two kinds of kisses: the kiss of affection and the kiss of Satan"; the former are the chaste and holy kisses he gives to his mother, while the latter are the kisses he shares with a sexually precocious girl named Red Esther; the former represent the ideal, the latter the real. As he grows older, he adds a third term in which the real and the ideal are combined. "Even the love of the flesh might be of two distinct kinds," he realizes. "There is love of body and soul, and there is a kind of love that is of the body only [...]. There is love and there is lust." Let us, for the sake of consistency,

135. Ibid., pp. 526, 3.

call Levinsky's three kinds of attraction *holy affection* (soul only), *romantic love* (body and soul), and *lust* (body only).¹³⁶

For Levinsky, Antomir Orthodoxy seems to recognize holy affection and lust (which are always strictly separated) but not romantic love. None of the pious people that he knows in the village express their sexuality openly. Levinsky is introduced to love by his friend Naphtali, a fellow Talmudist who has discovered secular learning and lost his faith, though he continues to study the Talmud for the sake of his *esn tage*. Naphtali tells Levinsky about two great Hebrew writers, Doctor Rachaeles and Abraham Tevkin. Tevkin courted Rachaeles's daughter by writing a long series of passionate letters not to her, but to her father. The story of Tevkin makes Levinsky believe that physical attraction does not have to be debasing, that angelic and demonic kisses can coexist, albeit perhaps only outside of Orthodoxy. Secular culture, that is, holds out a promise of fulfilling both sides of his nature. Shortly after hearing about Tevkin, Levinsky meets Matilda, the daughter of a wealthy and pious woman with whom he takes an *esn tog*. Matilda is a divorcee and lives in the style of the gentile Russian elite. She appears to be a cultured woman, like Doctor Rachaeles's daughter, and she also makes none-too-subtle sexual advances on Levinsky, who sees her as a miraculous combination of spiritual and bodily attractiveness. However, he is still too much the Talmudist to do more than meekly suffer her kisses. Matilda, who Levinsky later realizes was not a cultured woman at all but merely a sexual adventurer, demands that he shave his beard and become more worldly. If he does this, she tells him, then they can be together. Levinsky, mistaking her lust for love, agrees to do his best to become worthy of her, and at her suggestion he moves to America.

Levinsky's first New York romance is by far the novel's strangest. He rents a room from a matronly woman named, of all things, Mrs. Levinsky, who performs such motherly tasks as washing his clothes and keeping the house. At first Mrs. Levinsky disgusts him, but then something changes. At this point

136. Ibid., pp. 44, 119.

in the plot Levinsky is a freelance peddler, and his fellow peddlers have been pressuring him to shave his beard and act more American if he wants to make any money. Realizing that if he does not change his fortunes he will never have the leisure to pursue his intellectual interests, he takes their advice, compromising his idealism in the name of furthering it. He feels himself a debased creature, little better than an animal. In this frame of mind, he suddenly finds the brutish Mrs. Levinsky strangely alluring; she reminds him of Red Esther. He half-heartedly propositions her, but she is a married woman and will not hear of it, although she is flattered by the attention. Levinsky finds other lodgings.

Now, having traded in his ideals for immediate financial security, he is free to explore the “interesting” but “heartless” metropolis. He wonders at New York's permanent and apparently meaningless spectacle: its political bosses, corrupt cops, stark juxtapositions of wealth and poverty, and the like. As an erotic corollary, he begins sleeping with prostitutes, and his descent into total philistinism is complete. One of these prostitutes, however, proves to have the proverbial heart of gold. “Argentine Rachel” is a loving mother to her fatherless daughter, and treats Levinsky himself with tenderness. Levinsky realizes that Rachel has a noble character despite the sinful way in which she lives. Despite his best efforts to shed his idealism, he has rediscovered it, and he cannot continue to deny its importance; yet he also cannot return to Orthodoxy, whose strictures have lost their hold on him. So he transfers his idealism to secular culture again, for the first time since he realized Matilda's shallowness. This time he aspires to an American liberal arts education at City College.

But City College remains out of reach. Levinsky has been keeping busy with his work, first as a garment worker, and eventually as a budding capitalist. He steals the ace designer from his former employer and, staying afloat with a series of small loans, starts his own sweat shop, where he manufactures cheap but fashionable women's clothing for those who want to keep up with the “heartless” but “interesting” New York life. As a manager he is utterly ruthless, and he deliberately exploits his designer and his hands, refusing to recognize any good or evil in the amoral world of

business. Although he makes time to study, his factory's finances are so precarious that he continually defers enrolling in college. Instead his idealism once again attaches itself to a woman, which is a safer outlet for it from a business perspective. This time it is Madam Klesmer, the actress who speaks like an Israeli prophetess. Levinsky likes to think of Madam Klesmer as unattainable, a symbol of all that he has had to exclude from his business life.

Levinsky eventually gets his factory on a sound financial footing. We then see a familiar pattern repeat itself: when Levinsky is materially comfortable, he loses interest in holy affection and starts looking for romantic love. When Levinsky is set up with his *esn tog* he grows bored with the Talmud and falls for Matilda; when his peddling business picks up he stops going to religious services and takes up with Argentine Rachel; when his factory starts to succeed he forgets all about Madam Klesmer and once again feels listless until he meets a noble-spirited but sexually available woman. This time the woman is Dora, the wife of a brash former business associate who goes by the name "Maximum Max." Dora is, in some ways, Levinsky's mirror image. While his experience has been that idealism is difficult to sustain in America, she believes that it is only in America, where arranged marriages are rare and co-education is common, that a woman can pursue the things of the spirit. She and Maximum Max had entered an arranged marriage in Russia, when they were both too young to know what they were doing, and Dora now feels trapped with her boorish husband. At the same time, however, the very idealism that prompts her to dislike her husband also forbids her from sexually betraying him. Dora can see the promised land of female emancipation, but she cannot enter it. So she transfers all of her hopes to her daughter, Lucy. She becomes fixated on Lucy's schoolwork, and drills her on spelling and vocabulary, though it is clear that she does this as much for herself as for her daughter, tantalizing herself with glimpses of a world of culture that she knows will always be closed to her as the wife of Maximum Max. "Well, my own life is lost, but she shall be educated," is her constant refrain. Levinsky, whose heart also aches with frustrated cultural aspirations, appeals to her more than her husband, and the two

begin a chaste affair. Levinsky, however, wants to share the love of soul *and* body with her, and demands that they consummate the relationship. Dora relents in a moment of weakness, and then feels so disgusted with herself that she immediately breaks off their relationship and resigns herself to Maximum Max once and for all. She transfers the remainder of her emotional energy to Lucy. But, much later in the novel, Lucy disappoints her: she uses her education to snag a wealthy, elderly husband whom she admits she does not love. “I don't care if I marry a man with white hair, provided he can make a nice living for me,” as she puts it. Dora's plan to simply add the idealism of the Old World to the liberation of the New, a plan with which Levinsky is highly sympathetic, fails utterly.¹³⁷

There are no women in Levinsky's life for several years after Dora breaks off their affair. Despairing of finding romantic love, Levinsky once again falls back on his childhood idea that there is a bright line between the real and the ideal. On the side of the real, he throws himself into his work with more gusto and less ethics than ever, stealing designs from his competitors, undermining labor unions by making his shop attractive to Orthodox scabs, and waiting out strikes. He finds justification in Herbert Spencer, whose “cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest” becomes “the only thing I believed in.” “My business life had fostered the conviction in me that, outside of the family, the human world was as brutally selfish as the jungle, and that it was worm-eaten with hypocrisy into the bargain,” he recalls. Meanwhile, on the side of the ideal, having given up on romantic love, chaste “dreams of family life became my religion. Self-sacrificing devotion to one's family was the only kind of altruism and idealism I did not flout.” The goddess of this new “religion” is Fanny Kaplan, an insipid girl from a wealthy and devout Orthodox family that emigrated from Antomir. Although Levinsky and Fanny are engaged to be married (through her father, in the old-fashioned way), as a person Fanny does not appeal to him; Levinsky loves her as a symbol of all of the good qualities of Antomir that are so conspicuously absent from his Spencerian business

137. Cahan, *Rise of David Levinsky*, pp. 244, 490.

philosophy. But these Antomir virtues have all become abstractions for him, ideals toward which he will bow but not actually work. His relationship with Fanny is as brittle and theoretical as his Spencerism.¹³⁸

Levinsky abandons both Fanny and Spencer during a visit to the Rigi Kulm, a Jewish resort in the Catskills. He stops there for purely logistical reasons (he is en route to the Kaplans' upstate retreat), but soon finds himself enjoying the first vacation of his life. As soon as he sits down on the Rigi Kulm's porch, the natural world, which he has been thinking of a stage of brutal struggle, suddenly seems to possess human meaning: birds “embroidered the silence of the hour with a silvery whisper that spoke of rest and good-will,” and Levinsky “visioned a company of ghosts tiptoeing their way” to “a hollow in the slope of one of the mountains” that “looked for all the world like a huge spoon.” The idea that nature might house the spirit is a revelation to Levinsky, and he begins to question his social Darwinism. “Was this region exempt from the laws of space and distance?,” he wonders. “The bewitching azure of the sky and the divine taste of the air seemed to bear out a feeling that it was exempt from any law of nature with which I was familiar.”¹³⁹ Once the overly rigid “laws” of Spencerism give way, Levinsky, as usual, swings to the opposite philosophical extreme, and begins thinking of nature as a beautiful picture. Of course, this idea is only persuasive to someone with no material wants. Cahan has a bit of fun at the expense of Levinsky's fatuous aestheticism by giving him an embarrassingly effusive soliloquy about a sunset:

The play of color and light in the sky was a revelation to me. The edge of the sun, a vivid red, was peeping out of a gray patch of cloud that looked like a sack, the sack hanging with its mouth downward and the red disk slowly emerging from it. Spread directly underneath was a pool of molten gold into which the sun was seemingly about to drop. As the disk continued to glide out of the bag it gradually grew into a huge fiery ball of magnificent crimson, suffusing the valley with divine light. At the moment when it was just going to plunge into the golden pool the pool vanished. The crimson ball kept sinking

138. Ibid., p. 380.

139. Ibid., p. 406.

until it was buried in a region of darkness. When the last fiery speck of it disappeared the sky broke into an evensong of color so solemn, so pensive that my wretched mood interpreted it as a visible dirge for the dead sun. Rose lapsed into purple, purple merged into blue, the blue bordering on a field of hammered gold that was changing shape and hue; all of which was eloquent of sadness. It seemed as though the heavens were in an ecstasy of grief and everybody about me were about to break into tears.¹⁴⁰

Levinsky's newfound belief in the power of the mind to project its own meanings onto nature has a dollars-and-cents side to it as well. The Rigi Kulm is full of financial transactions that do not comport with his older conviction that material existence can only be sustained by grinding struggle. The other guests gamble constantly, and at dinnertime gold-digging women parade themselves before the crowd; Levinsky compares their rising and falling prospects to a stock market.¹⁴¹ Beauty and fantasy, it seems, might rule over brute force.

His head is reeling with these new ideas when he sees a beautiful young woman playing tennis gracefully; the woman looks like a "Greek statue" to Fanny Kaplan's cigar-store Indian. The woman turns out to be Anna Tevkin, the daughter of the poet, Abraham Tevkin, who had occasioned Levinsky's first thoughts about the love that combines body and soul, the love he had sought with Matilda, Dora, and in a limited way with Argentine Rachel. As soon as he learns her identity, Levinsky immediately falls for her. Aside from the "novel interest" occasioned by her beauty and intelligence, she excites his "reminiscent interest" by reminding him of his youthful ardor. She becomes the goddess of his new religion of beauty, in which the iron laws and "conventional lies" of life in the industrial metropolis fall away. Everything that she does strikes him as spontaneous, free from calculation and tiresome effort, even when she talks about abstractions. When she is sucked into an argument about literature, for instance, Levinsky reflects that "the atmosphere surrounding the books and authors she named had a genuine fascination for her. There was a naïve sincerity in her rhetoric, and her delivery and gestures

140. Ibid., p. 437.

141. Thanks to Eitan Kensky for pointing out the speculative dimensions of the Rigi Kulm scene.

had a rhythm that seemed to be akin to the rhythm of her movements in the tennis-court.”¹⁴²

What Levinsky fails to see, but readers familiar with the arc of Cahan's career can hardly miss, is that Anna's literary creed is not, as Levinsky believes, art for art's sake; rather, she articulates Cahan's own theories of literary realism. “The newspapers are life,” she observes; “and life is the source of literature, or should be.” She rehashes some of Cahan's ideas about the superiority of realism to both sermon-novels and *shund*. “If you're bored by [Ibsen's plays] it's because you're probably looking for stories, for 'action,’” she says. “But art is something more significant than that. There is moral force and beauty in Ibsen which one misses in the old masters. [...] In good literature the moral is not preached as a sermon [...] It naturally follows from the life it presents. Anyhow, the other kind of literature is mere froth. You read page after page and there doesn't seem to be any substance to it.” The continuity between her tennis-playing and literature-reading interests does not indicate, as Levinsky believes, that she has made her everyday life conform to the standards of art, but rather that she sees a continuity between an unpretentious, natural style of living and a realist literature that shares those qualities. Levinsky, of course, is constitutionally incapable of accepting her literary ideas. He tries to get her attention with a lame remark about “the discrepancy between the spiritual quality of the sunset and the after-supper satisfaction of the onlookers,” thinking that she will be impressed by his brooding romanticism, but she takes “no notice of the remark.”¹⁴³

One reason that Levinsky so badly mistakes Anna's aesthetics is that he confuses her with her father. After Levinsky breaks his engagement to Fanny (whom he now recognizes as a terrible bore), he returns to New York and thinks about how to win Anna's favor. He finds her father's Hebrew writings in the New York Public Library and studies them before tracking the poet down at a cafe. He professes his admiration for Tevkin's verse, and for his daughter. Levinsky quotes several of Tevkin's poems for the reader:

142. Cahan, *Rise of David Levinsky*, pp. 409, 380, 416.

143. *Ibid.*, pp. 413, 415-16, 439.

“My Children”

My children love me, yet my heart is hungry. They are mine, yet they are strangers. I am homesick for them even when I clasp them to my bosom.

“Poetry”

The children of Israel have been pent up in cities. The stuffy synagogue has been field and forest to them. But then there is more beauty in a heaven visioned by a congregation of worshipers than in the bluest heaven sung by the minstrel of landscapes. They are not worshipers. They are poets. It is not God they are speaking to. It is a sublime image. It is not their Creator. It is their poetic creation.

[A selection from a poem whose title is not given:]

Saith Koheleth, the son of David: 'All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full.' Ah! the rivers are flowing and flowing, yet they are full as ever. And my lips are speaking and speaking, yet my heart is full as ever. Behold! The brook is murmuring and murmuring, but I know not of what. My heart is yearning and yearning, and I know not of what. I cherish the murmur of the brook. I cherish the pang of my lonely heart.¹⁴⁴

Tevkin, with his “yearning and yearning” and his “cherish[ing] the pang of my lonely heart,” reprises Tzinchadzi even more emphatically than Levinsky himself. Indeed, he pushes the tendency to separate the ideal from the real to its logical conclusion. Whereas Tzinchadzi wanted Zelaya but could not have her, Tevkin is “homesick” for his children “even when I clasp them to my bosom”; the world, for Tevkin, has no power whatsoever to satisfy the spirit's demands. In fact those demands are inherently impossible to satisfy, even when people share mutual love (in this case, between parent and child). At the same time, they are the source of all beauty and poetry, and are better than any external “landscapes.” Tzinchadzi-like idealism, Tevkin implies, is a kind of glorious solipsism. In conversation with Levinsky, Tevkin explains that it follows from his aesthetic views that Russia is a better place to live than America. In Russia, the body is oppressed by hunger and cold but the soul is free to commune with itself, while in America one is expected to apply one's mind to the constant scramble for success, and culture itself is just another business. For Tevkin, life is best when one recognizes that “business is business and poetry is poetry,” and the two should have nothing to do with each other; he could hardly

144. Ibid., pp. 451-52.

have stated Levinsky's own outlook more elegantly, and he could hardly have said anything more antithetical to his daughter's ideas.¹⁴⁵

The absolute line that Tevkin draws between material and the spiritual things makes him an even more irresponsible and unethical businessman than Levinsky. Tevkin, who makes no money from his obscure poetry, is (in another callback to Tzinchadzi) trying to make a fast buck in real estate speculation when Levinsky catches up with him. Levinsky is genuinely interested in Tevkin's poetry, in addition to his daughter; Tevkin, for his part, is interested in Levinsky's money, and repeatedly asks him for loans, which Levinsky at first refuses. Tevkin decides to string Levinsky along, inviting him to his home frequently so that he can angle for a loan while Levinsky angles for Anna. Anna, meanwhile, has taken a dislike to Levinsky but is too tactful to push him away, especially when her father seems so bent on cultivating his acquaintance. This tense situation persists for several months before Levinsky decides that he has waited long enough: he will consummate his new mind-over-matter philosophy by both proposing to Anna and going in on some investments with Tevkin. The investments fail (he only preserves his fortune by moving his money at the last minute), and Anna refuses him and asks him not to speak to her again. His belief in the power of mind over matter evaporates and he returns to his curmudgeonly Spencerism, looking back on his love for Anna as the “aberration” of a brain “addled” by the *ignus fatuus* of speculation.

At this point Levinsky is well into middle age, and his last chances at love are slipping away from him. He becomes friendly with a gentile widow who lives in his building, a woman of culture and beauty who seems to be a good match for him; he considers marrying her, but he cannot bring himself to violate that severest of Orthodox taboos. He resigns himself to the fact that his idealism, which he cannot quite discard altogether, is destined to leave him forever disappointed; the only real pleasure he

145. Ibid., p. 457.

gets is from thinking back on his Talmud-studying days, which he can do all day thanks to the fortune he has made from amoral business dealings.

The Rise of David Levinsky is, like so many other members of the genre, a *Bildungsroman* of failure, whose protagonist fails to find fulfillment in social life. Whereas most novels of this type blame some defect in society for this failure, *David Levinsky* blames its protagonist's solipsistic idealism, which leads to his arrested development, his isolation from his fellow immigrants (and, we might add, from his fellow workers in his younger days), and his inability to find love. Cahan could not deny that there were prices to be paid for his Herbartian insistence on coming to the ideal only through the real, prices both personal – Cahan's “irritability” – and social – the gradual weakening of socialist consciousness among his readership. But he could deny that the alternative was any better.

Willa Cather and Maria Montessori: To Make Oneself Into a Vessel

In her preface to a 1925 edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Willa Cather praises Sarah Orne Jewett for avoiding the “common fallacy” that the writer can achieve a distinctive voice “by improving upon his subject-matter, using his 'imagination' upon it and twisting it to suit his purpose.”¹⁴⁶ Rather, the subject-matter must be allowed to speak for itself. This willingness to cede control to her materials is, as her biographer Sharon O'Brien points out, something that Cather found lacking in her own early work, especially her first novel, the 1912 *Alexander's Bridge*.¹⁴⁷ Writing *Alexander's Bridge*, she later recalled, “was like riding in a park, with someone not altogether congenial, to whom you had to be talking all the time.” She contrasts that experience with the writing of *O Pioneers!*, which “was like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding.”¹⁴⁸ In *Alexander's Bridge*, she pilots a conversation through a landscape of conventions; in *O Pioneers!*, she let her instincts choose their own path, and, as when riding alone, remains silent. She describes a similar contrast in the preface to a 1922 edition of *Alexander's Bridge*:

After he has once or twice done a story that formed itself, inevitably, in his mind, [the writer] will not often turn back to the building of external stories again. [...] With this material he is another writer. He has less and less power of choice about the moulding of it. It seems to be there of itself, already moulded. If he tries to meddle with its vague outline, to twist it into some categorical shape, above all if he tries to adapt or modify its mood, he destroys its value. In working with this material he finds that he need have little to do with literary devices; he comes to depend more and more on something else—the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day.¹⁴⁹

Cather arrived at her mature style by reimagining the act of artistic creation, not as deliberate construction (“the building of external stories”) but as “accelerating a natural process” that exists

146. Cather, Willa. *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. New York: Knopf, 1920, p. 50.

147. O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 388.

148. Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1913), p. 171.

149. Cather, Willa. *Alexander's Bridge*. Ed. Frederick M. Link. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2007 (1912), p. 195.

outside of the conscious mind.¹⁵⁰ In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather's semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* of 1915, she describes Thea Kronborg's creativity as an indwelling presence with a life of its own, "more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. [...] The something came and went, she never knew how." Thea's artistic development consists in making herself a "vessel" for this mysterious force.¹⁵¹

Despite this emphasis on the artist's receptivity, Cather does not (like, say, Whitman) glorify complete openness to experience. Almost the opposite: to hear the voice within, one must shield it from noise. Thea's "obligation" to her friendly spirit is to preserve its "secrecy," to "protect it even from herself" and keep "that part of herself from being caught up in the meshes of common things."¹⁵² Cather frequently recurs to images of creativity flourishing within an isolated stronghold, such as Thea's upstairs room and Panther Canyon hideaway in *The Song of the Lark*, or Godfrey St. Peter's study and the Blue Mesa in *The Professor's House*. Alexandra Bergson of *O Pioneers!* sees her own task as providing a sanctuary in which the creative energies of both land and people can work themselves out. With her "most unusual trimness and care for detail," the "order and fine arrangement" with which she manages her farm, she enables the land to "wor[k] itself." "It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself," she says, "and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still."¹⁵³ She turns her farm into an "asylum" for the eccentric Ivar, whom her conventional neighbors want to commit to a mental hospital; Ivar, in turn, unlocks the energies of skittish animals by making them feel secure and calm. Alexandra is proudest, however, of the protection she gives to her youngest brother, Emil, whom she keeps from heavy farm work and sends to college. While Lou and

150. The phrase "accelerating a natural process" is from Cather's approving description of the art of the Mesa Verde people. Cather, Willa. "Mesa Verde Wonderland Is Easy to Reach," *Denver Times*, (January 31, 1916): 7.

151. Cather, Willa. *The Song of the Lark*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 (1915), pp. 72, 258.

152. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

153. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, pp. 49, 65.

Oscar, the middle Bergson children, have let their “minds get stiff” from constant wrangling with the soil, Emil “shall do whatever he wants to,” she declares. “He is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for.”¹⁵⁴

In Cather's novels, however, too much of this sort of protection is often a bad thing. Thinking about the contrast between siblings who have had to work the land and those who have been sent to school in the town of Black Hawk, Jim Burden of *My Ántonia* notes that “the younger brothers and sisters [...] who have had 'advantages,' never seem to me, when I meet them now, half as interesting or half as educated” as “the older girls, who helped break up the wild sod.” Disdaining hard labor, the smug town-raised children sit obediently at schoolroom desks that make them “round-shouldered and hollow-chested,” and are so “listless and dull” that they cannot even make their own conversation when they go courting, relying on their parents' “blundering attempts to warm up the atmosphere.” As adults, they plod along the path of least resistance, becoming small-time merchants while their “stalwart” siblings become successful farmers.¹⁵⁵ Like the Black Hawk children, Emil Bergson grows restless and insecure because he has never done “something on my own account.” His pent-up energy finds an outlet in his affair with his married neighbor, Marie, which drives her husband to murder both lovers. After Emil's death, Alexandra blames herself for encouraging Emil to spend time with the “city-bred” Marie, who “improved his manners” and further separated him from the hardships of farming.¹⁵⁶ If some protection from “the meshes of common things” is necessary, it seems, too much protection leads to spoiling. Or, thinking of Godfrey St. Peter, we could say that too much enclosure leads to suffocation.

Why did Cather shift from an aesthetic of construction, in which creative problems are imagined

154. Ibid., pp. 69, 65.

155. Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*, New York: Penguin, 1994 (1918), p. 153, 155.

156. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, pp. 84, 157, 167.

architecturally (as with the title structure in *Alexander's Bridge*), to an aesthetic of receptivity, in which creative problems are imagined in terms of the under- or over-protection of an indwelling spirit? Cather herself attributes the change to a natural process of working-through. "I think usually the young writer must have his affair with the external material he covets; must imitate and strive to follow the masters he most admires, until he finds he is starving for reality and cannot make this go any longer," she writes in the 1922 *Alexander's Bridge* preface.¹⁵⁷ This inner development, however, seems at the least to have been catalyzed by an intellectual encounter: her mature aesthetic ideas also strikingly resemble those of Maria Montessori, who enjoyed brief but intense popularity, particularly in Cather's professional and social circles, during the period between *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers*. For all their similarities, however, Cather's relationship to Montessori, like Cahan's to the American Herbartians, is one of "Bildung to the second degree," a superposition of optimistic acceptance and pessimistic rejection of educational ideology that art can sustain but for which philosophy lacks the negative capability. Both Montessori and Cather reject the social-action progressivism of Croly, Lippmann, and Dewey because they believe that human life is ultimately governed by an inner drive with a mind of its own, which demands reverence rather than Lippmannian "mastery." Whereas Montessori herself as progressive in a different sense, however, the elements of Montessori's ideas that Cather adopts lead her to a deep skepticism about reform politics of any kind.

Here is a chronology of the critical period in which Cather both encountered Montessori and inaugurated her mature style. Cather wrote the first draft of *Alexander's Bridge* from spring through autumn of 1911, and began *O Pioneers!* that winter, finishing it in early 1913.¹⁵⁸ Between 1906 and September 1911, she was the associate editor of *McClure's Magazine*, where she became a close

157. Cather, *Alexander's Bridge*, p. 196.

158. Rosowski, Susan. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1986, pp. 33, 45.

confidant of S.S. McClure. She even she ghost-wrote her employer's 1913 autobiography.¹⁵⁹ In the winter of 1910, McClure's representative in London heard from a friend, Josephine Tozier, about the *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's House), the experimental school that Montessori had opened in Rome in 1907. McClure was intrigued, and commissioned Tozier to return to the *Casa dei Bambini* to write an article about Montessori's methods. According to his Cather-written autobiography, McClure then sent Tozier's manuscript to "several authorities on kindergartening and pedagogy in the United States," who "greatly differed in their estimates of Montessori's methods," some to the point of being "very antagonistic." The editor sensed that he had hit upon a controversial, attention-grabbing topic.¹⁶⁰ When Tozier's article appeared in the May 1911 issue of *McClure's*, it was among the first American treatments of the Italian educator and her work outside of specialized educational journals. Her article (which will be discussed in more detail below) was such a hit that *McClure's* had to print extra editions, and the magazine became a kind of nerve center for the nascent American Montessori movement, publishing letters from parents, educators, and doctors, and reporting on the progress of the English translation of Montessori's first book. In January 1912, while Cather was working up *O Pioneers!* from a pair of 1911 short stories, another Tozier article appeared describing Montessori's trademark "didactic apparatus," the custom-made physical objects that play a central role in her pedagogy. Montessori herself wrote an article for the May 1912 *McClure's*, on "Disciplining Children," and around the same time, *The Montessori Method* appeared in English.¹⁶¹ McClure, meanwhile, joined the inner circle of American Montessori enthusiasts, at whose center were Alexander Graham Bell and his wife Mabel Gardiner Hubbard, who formed the Montessori American Committee in the spring of 1912 to raise awareness of the Italian educator's work. Later that year, McClure ("a more talented editor than

159. Stinson, Robert, "S.S. McClure's Autobiography: The Progressive as Self-Made Man," *American Quarterly* 22:2 (Summer, 1970), p. 206.

160. McClure, S.S. [Willa Cather], *My Autobiography*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914, pp. 252-53.

161. Kramer, Rita, *Maria Montessori: A Biography*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976, pp. 160-162.

businessman,” in one scholar's judicious assessment) lost control of the magazine that bore his name, and forced his way back into the limelight by conducting Montessori on a grand tour of America, beginning in December 1913, on which he introduced her to the public and showed slide photographs of the *Casa dei Bambini*.¹⁶² Based on her personal tie to McClure and her professional tie to his magazine, Cather would have been well aware of all these developments.

In the autumn of 1912, shortly before Cather began writing *O Pioneers!*, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a close friend of the novelist from her University of Nebraska days, published *A Montessori Mother*, one of the first American books about Montessori education. Cather and Fisher were estranged at the time, but they still had many mutual friends and acquaintances, so it seems likely that Cather would have been aware of the book. Fisher reports that “I found myself set upon and required to give an account of what I had seen [at the Casa dei Bambini], not only by my family and friends, but by callers, by acquaintances, by letters from people I knew, and many from those whose names were unfamiliar.”¹⁶³ Perhaps some of these inquirers then told Cather about Fisher's interpretation of Montessori, although we need not make that assumption. *A Montessori Mother*, which went through at least six printings between 1912 and 1924, was a major influence on America's popular reception of the “*Dottoressa*,” as Montessori liked to be called.¹⁶⁴ We will explore both Montessori's thought and its American reception in more detail below, but for now it may be useful to note the striking parallels between Cather's ideas about the over- and under-protection of the creative spirit and Fisher's gloss of Montessori.

According to Fisher, the Montessori ideal of “proper training” of the young involves, first and foremost, curating the environment in which their inner drive to self-development and independence

162. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, pp. 172, 182.

163. Fisher, Dorothy Canfield, *A Montessori Mother*, New York: Henry Holt, 1912, p. v.

164. The six printings are mentioned on the copyright page of the cited edition of *A Montessori Mother*.

unfolds. “It means years of patient, intelligent, faithful effort on the part of the guardian, to clear away from before the child the different obstacles to the free natural growth” of the “desirable instincts of human nature.”¹⁶⁵ Some of these obstacles are physical, such as tight clothing and badly-designed furniture that prevent free muscular development. The more serious obstacles, however, are the irrelevant tasks and timetables that adults impose on children, which keep them from fully working through the problems that actually contribute to their growth. Marveling at the unhurried pace and absence of clocks in the *Casa dei Bambini*, Fisher recalls that

I fell to asking myself why there was always so much need for haste in my own life and in that of my children? [...] I remember my scorn of the parties of Cook's tourists, clattering into the Sistine Chapel for a momentary glance at the achievement of a lifetimes of genius, painted on the ceiling, and then galloping out again for a hop-skip-and-jump race through the Stanze of Raphael. It occurred to me, disquietingly, that possibly, instead of really training my children, I might be dragging them headlong on a Cook's tour through life.¹⁶⁶

Fisher points out three prevalent causes of the “Cook's tour” treatment of children. First, adults fear that children will endanger themselves if they take as much time as they need to solve their basic problems of perception and coordination. “For instance,” she writes, it is commonly believed that “if a child must dress in a cold room it is better for an adult to stuff the little arms and legs into the clothes with all haste, rather than run the risk of chilling the child.” Second, children's slowness and need for exploration often conflict with adults' sense of social propriety. The child who risks a chill might be dressed in the warm parlor instead of the cold bedroom, thus removing the need for haste, but for the fact that “we have a tradition that it is 'messy' and 'common' to have dressing and undressing going on anywhere except in a bedroom.” “Is the ordered respectability of my warm parlor worth a check to my child's normal growth?,” asks Fisher.¹⁶⁷ Third, more and more school boards are composed of “business-men with a cult for efficiency” who are fixated on students passing “given examinations on

165. Fisher, *A Montessori Mother*, p. 161.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

given subjects,” at the expense of “the essential necessity of inculcating initiative and self-dependence in their pupils.”¹⁶⁸ Keeping one eye on Cather, we might note that the takeover of the schools by business, “the new commercialism, the aim to 'show results' that was undermining and vulgarizing education,” is one of the many threats to Godfrey St. Peter's creativity in *The Professor's House*. While courses in “book-keeping, experimental farming, domestic science, dress-making, and what not” multiply, the ideal of learning as unhurried, self-directed meditation as practiced by St. Peter and his physicist colleague Robert Crane is sidelined in order to “give the taxpayers what they wanted.”¹⁶⁹

The opposite number to the harried Cook's tour child is the pampered child with too many “advantages,” to use Cather's word, and no responsibilities. The children of comfortable families, Fisher observes, are “boarders (though gratuitous ones) with their father and mother, and, as a natural consequence, they have the remote, detached, unsympathetic aloofness from the problem of running the house which is characteristic of the race of boarders.” Being constantly waited upon breeds a “bored, indifferent impatience” which “crush[es] out a child's initiative, his natural desire for self-dependence, his self-respect, and his natural instinct for self-education.” As an extreme example, Fisher describes a child from a wealthy family who, upon enrolling in the *Casa dei Bambini*, “was given a choice of geometric insets, and provided with colored pencils and a big sheet of paper, baits which not even an idiot child can resist, and, sitting uninventive before this delightful array, remarked with a polite indifference that she was used to having people draw pictures for her. The poor child had acquired the habit of having somebody else do even her playing.”¹⁷⁰ Fortunately, Fisher reports, the *Casa dei Bambini*, in which pupils are responsible for choosing their own activities and cleaning up after themselves, revitalized this little girl in a matter of weeks.

168. Ibid., p. 236.

169. Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2002 (1925), pp. 120-21.

170. Ibid., pp. 34, 41.

If the “cult of efficiency” entangles the developing personality in what Cather calls “the meshes of common things,” the threat of a development arrested or warped due to isolation from live problems is represented in the Montessorian imagination by the kindergarten. The kindergarten movement, inspired by the educational theories of the German educator Friedrich Froebel, had been spreading steadily in America since the 1860s, predominantly in the form of privately funded programs, some for the children of the affluent, others as charitable institutions for the children of the poor.¹⁷¹ In contrast to Montessori's emphasis on building independence through self-motivated problem-solving, Froebel believed that children could be smoothly inducted into the social world, and into awareness of the cosmos more generally, by translating adult concepts into a child-friendly repertoire of imaginative games, songs, stories, and the like. Kindergarteners (as kindergarten teachers, not students, were called) shared successful exercises in specialized journals, from which each teacher chose her own favorites. When she writes about the kindergarten, Montessori describes children pretending that wooden blocks are animals in a stable and singing a song about the kindly fairies enclosed in every raindrop. For Montessori, the kindergarten involved adults imposing their own imagination upon children, and working up artificial enthusiasm for contrivances that did not address the child's real needs. Whereas the Montessori teacher “is but moving about from one little river of life to another, lifting a sluice gate here for a sluggish nature, constructing a dam there to help a too impetuous nature to concentrate its forces,” Fisher writes, the kindergartener “seems obsessed with the idea [...] that it is, after all, her duty to manage somehow to increase the flow of the little rivers by pouring into them some of her own superabundant vital force.” After an overstimulated “happy, happy morning in the kindergarten,” she observes, many children are “unable to eat their luncheons, unable to take their afternoon naps, quivering between laughter and tears, and finding very dull the quiet peace of the home life.”¹⁷²

171. Cremin, Lawrence. *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980*, New York: Harper Collins, 1976, p. 299.

172. Fisher, *A Montessori Mother*, pp. 182-83, 189.

Both Cather and Montessori, then, see the development of personality, or creativity (the extent to which these terms are interchangeable will become clearer below), as a matter of sheltering a force that resides within each individual from interference, while at the same time ensuring that this force has opportunities to try itself out on live problems. Both stake out a middle ground between an obsession with productivity for its own sake (the “cult for efficiency,” the mindset of Lou and Oscar Bergson) and isolation from productivity altogether (the kindergarten, Emil Bergson). To understand the extent and significance of these parallels, we will first reconstruct Montessori's thought and the reasons for its warm reception in America, and then use the Italian educator's concepts, assumptions, and anxieties to illuminate Cather's ideas about the formation and vocation of artists.

An Educational Wonder-Worker

According to progressives such as Walter Lippmann, Herbert Croly, and John Dewey, the America of the 1910s was struggling to maintain its power of coordinated activity in the face of increasing complexity. Harder collective-action problems (such as those presented by municipal utilities), greater differentiation of social functions, increasing barriers to communication between experts and the public, an immigration-fueled plurality of cultures, and inadequate ideologies left over from simpler times all stood in the way of intelligent self-government. After its consolidation under one government in 1870, Italy faced the parallel but even more radical challenge of uniting people formerly governed by different states into a national society capable of ruling itself. When the new state was formed, almost three-fourths of its citizens were illiterate, and many lived in rural poverty. As factories opened in Italian cities, sprawling slums sprang up where sanitation was sometimes literally nonexistent. The wealthy elite who controlled the government were reluctant to fund the education of the poor. Despite

these obstacles, there was, in the words of one observer, “a widespread conviction among the present generation of Italians that all of them have more or less borne a hand in 'making' their country,” and a corresponding “rage for education” that would bring more prosperity and political power to the lower classes.¹⁷³

Italian reformers thought of progress somewhat differently from their American counterparts. They were more impressed by science's power to improve life for everybody, as well as its socially revolutionary potential. Their thinking about urban poverty was focused more on public health and criminology, and less on the problems of machine politics and ethnic ghettoization. Unlike American reformers, too, they had reason to hope that their immediate situation could be vastly improved simply by raising literacy rates.

Maria Montessori was born in the same year as the new Italy, and her search for a mature identity mirrored that of her country. Her father, a decorated veteran of one of the campaigns that eventually led to Italian unification, was a successful government accountant with conservative views on religion and gender roles. Her mother, the daughter of a landed family and the niece of a “distinguished scholar-priest” who wrote about the reconciliation of science and religion, hoped that the new Italy would offer greater opportunities to women.¹⁷⁴ Torn between the traditionalist and modernizing impulses that her parents respectively embodied, Montessori (like Alexandra Bergson) took on a masculine-coded role that would have been unavailable to her a generation earlier, but which nonetheless played to preconceptions about women's nurturing nature. Against her father's wishes (but not his outright prohibition), after finishing high school she enrolled as a medical student at the University of Rome and, upon passing her examinations with flying colors in 1896, became Italy's first

173. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 29. This brief sketch of the Italian scene and Montessori's place in it is drawn primarily from Chapter 1 of Kramer's biography.

174. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24.

female doctor. Montessori became a popular figure, winning esteem among scientists with her publications in medical journals, among progressives like her mother with her speeches at feminist conferences, and among conservatives like her father with her traditional dress and emphasis on good housekeeping as a boon to public health. Journalists made the accomplished and gracious “*giovana Dottoressa*” a symbol of Italian progress.

After a few years of medical practice, Montessori developed a special interest in the insane and mentally disabled children in Rome's asylums. They were housed side by side with insane adults, including dangerous criminals, and received minimal psychological attention. Montessori believed, contrary to prevailing medical opinion, that many of these children could live in society if they received the proper education. She had studied the work of the French physician Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1774-1838) and his pupil Edouard Seguin (1812-1880), who had developed techniques for teaching reading, writing, and profitable skills such as sewing to “Idiots and Other Backward Children” (to borrow part of the title of one of Seguin's books). Pedagogically, Itard and Seguin emphasized the training of sensory and motor powers, rather than the prevalent method of rote memorization. Seguin manufactured simple devices with which his pupils could practice threading beads, buttoning and lacing cloth, and identifying colors, shapes, lengths, and textures.¹⁷⁵ Eventually his pupils learned to recognize and copy the shapes of letters, which led, in some cases, to literacy and thence to more traditional school studies. “First the education of the senses, then the education of the intellect” was Montessori's summary of his basic idea.¹⁷⁶

Montessori's view of the mentally disabled was also shaped by contemporary Italian anthropologists such as Cesare Lombroso, who believed that criminals were distinct biological types (the “born thief,” “born murderer,” et cetera) with abnormal skull shapes and other bodily deformities

175. Ibid., pp. 59-61.

176. Ibid., p. 76.

that could be scientifically measured. Criminals' (alleged) physical peculiarities suggested, for Lombroso, that they had degenerated to the evolutionary level of “primitive man” or anthropoid apes. This medical view of crime downplayed the influence of social conditions, and denied that lawbreakers might have reasonable justifications for their actions. On the other hand, by describing crime as a kind of disease in the social body, he shifted the focus of criminology away from punishment and toward prevention and cure. Lombroso thought that the process of degeneration could be arrested, or even reversed, if potential criminals received the proper care and education when they were very young.¹⁷⁷ The precise nature of this care and education, Lombroso held, had yet to be discovered, and could be developed only after extensive study of criminals and much trial and error.

When Montessori discovered the writings of Itard and Seguin, therefore, she saw a potential remedy, not just for individual disability, but for the “vice and crime” that both resulted from and threatened the progress of the new Italy.¹⁷⁸ To the extent that upbringings that would prevent crime depended on conditions outside of schools, she also saw a powerful argument for broader social reform. In an 1899 speech at a women's conference, for instance, Montessori declared that “inhuman working conditions [for mothers] will produce a sick, degenerate society in which there are more miserable children, more idiots, more delinquents, more of the insane, all of whom will have to be provided for in jails or hospitals or asylums at great cost to society.”¹⁷⁹ She published and spoke frequently on the social benefits that would flow from more scientific and humane treatment of the mentally disabled, and had, according to her biographer Rita Kramer, “a decisive effect” in the campaign to establish a school for training what we would now call special education teachers. In 1900, three years and many fund-raising campaigns after the idea was initially proposed, the University of

177. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

178. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

179. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Rome opened the Orthophrenic School, a “Medico-Pedagogical Institute” with teacher-training courses and laboratory classrooms. Montessori was the logical choice to lead the school, and she accepted a position as co-director, alongside the physician Giuseppe Montesano.¹⁸⁰

At the Orthophrenic School, Montessori synthesized the educational romanticism of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel, with its idea that all learning is gradual, incremental, and dependent on the student's self-motivated engagement, with Lombroso's method of physical measurement and the sense-training theories of Itard and Seguin. Teachers-in-training studying at the school were taught to make fine discriminations among physical objects, so that they could see which characteristics their students did and did not perceive; to use special teaching materials such as those devised by Seguin and Froebel; to teach gymnastics and other forms of physical education; and to take anthropological measurements of their students and record their behavior in a systematic way.¹⁸¹ Relative to previous attempts to educate the mentally disabled, the Orthophrenic School methods were phenomenally successful. One anecdote, which Montessori recounts in *The Montessori Method*, may suffice to illustrate how, and how well, they worked.

While teaching deficient children I happened to observe the following fact: An idiot girl of eleven years, who was possessed of normal strength and motor power in her hands, could not learn to sew, or even to take the first step, darning, which consists in passing the needle first over, then under the woof, now taking up, now leaving, a number of threads.

I set the child to weaving with the Froebel mats, in which a strip of paper is threaded transversely in and out among vertical strips of paper held fixed at top and bottom. I thus came to think of the analogy between the two exercises, and became much interested in my observation of the girl. When she had become skilled in the Froebel weaving, I led her back again to the sewing, and saw with pleasure that she was now able to follow the darning. From that time on, our sewing classes began with a regular course in the Froebel weaving.¹⁸²

Through such experiments with educational playthings – which Montessori called “didactic apparatus” and educators today call “manipulatives” – she arrived at an educational principle that strongly

180. Ibid., Chapter 4, passim.

181. Ibid., p. 87.

182. Montessori, Maria. *The Montessori Method*. Trans. Anne E. George. New York: Schocken, 1964 (1912), pp. 257-58.

resembled Pestalozzi's idea of moving from the simple to the complex:

I saw that the necessary movements of the hand in sewing *had been prepared without having the child sew*, and that we should really find the way to *teach* the child *how*, before *making him execute* a task. I saw especially that preparatory movements could be carried on, and reduced to a mechanism, by means of repeated exercises not in the work itself but in that which prepares for it. Pupils could then come to the real work, able to perform it without ever having directly set their hands to it before.¹⁸³

Pestalozzi broke large concepts into smaller ones, teaching points before lines, lines before polygons, polygons before prisms, and so forth, so that his students would fully understand the ideas to which words like “cube” referred. Montessori, working with pupils for whom self-supporting work was a more immediate necessity than intellectual clarity, focused on actions rather than concepts. Whereas Pestalozzi's students memorized the meaning of simple terms, Montessori's developed muscle memories of simple movements. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's comparison of Montessori pedagogy to instruction in a musical instrument is, therefore, quite apt. Traditional pedagogy, she writes in *A Montessori Mother*, feels “as though a musician should command us to play the chromatic scale of D minor, and then blame us for the resultant discord. He should have taught us a multitude of things before requiring such a complicated achievement, — how to hold our fingers over the piano-keys, how to read music, how to play simpler scales.”¹⁸⁴

Montessori's success with “the girl who could not sew” made her wonder whether the method of “teach[ing] the child how, before making him execute” could be applied to instruction in reading and writing. She had already been giving students “plane geometric insets” in which they could trace the contours of shapes with their fingers. Now she commissioned a set of enameled wooden letters that she had the children trace, first with their fingers, then with a little stick that was held like a pencil (because “to hold and to manipulate a little stick securely, corresponds to the *acquisition of a special muscular mechanism which is independent*” of the shapes of the letters, but still necessary for writing). She also

183. Ibid.

184. Fisher, *A Montessori Mother*, p. 148.

created a set of large printed cards, one for vowels, others for consonants, on which the letters were organized “according to analogy of form” rather than sound or alphabetical order. The vowel card, for instance, had one row for *o*, *e*, and *a*, all of which are written with closed loops, and another row for *i* and *u*. Montessori (or her trainees) asked the students to place the wooden letters over their counterparts on the printed card, repeating the names of the letters frequently. Soon the students could write the whole alphabet on a chalkboard, although they did not yet understand the idea of letters standing for sounds in a word. This latter concept she introduced using a set of printed cards on which letters were paired with pictures of common objects. These picture-cards were combined with the rest of the literacy apparatus in exercises which, Montessori believed, trained each of the basic skills necessary to reading and writing: “The teacher, naming the consonant according to the phonetic method, indicates the letter, and then the card, pronouncing the names of the objects painted there, and emphasizing the first letter, as, for example, '*p-pear*: give me the consonant *p* –put it in its place [on the large card], touch it,' etc.” “Tracing the letter, in the fashion of writing, begins the muscular education which prepares for writing,” Montessori concluded. “The child who looks, recognises, and touches the letters in the manner of writing, prepares himself simultaneously for reading and writing. Touching the letters and looking at them at the same time, fixes the image more quickly through the co-operation of the senses. Later, the two facts separate; looking becomes reading; touching becomes writing. According to the type of the individual, some learn to read first, others to write.”¹⁸⁵

These methods were widely adopted in the world of Italian special education. Montessori taught them to over two hundred teachers-in-training at the Orthophrenic School. Later, she had some eight-year-olds in the school's laboratory classes take the standard examinations in reading and writing for “normal” children of their age. When they passed the tests, Montessori's public persona was transformed; no longer the merely promising “*giovanna dottoressa*,” she was now a bona fide

185. Ibid., pp. 259-261.

wonder-worker who had made broken minds whole. Montessori herself, however, while pleased with her accomplishments, knew that she had not erased her students' mental disabilities. Rather, she writes in *The Montessori Method*, “while everyone was admiring the progress of my idiots, I was searching for the reasons which could keep the happy healthy children of the common schools on so low a plane that they could be equalled in tests of intelligence by my unfortunate pupils!”¹⁸⁶ If her methods could raise the “defective” to the level of the “normal,” how high could they raise the “normal”? What if, instead of merely preventing the social diseases that were thought to spring from mental disability, she could make the whole social body stronger? In 1901, at the height of her success, Montessori abandoned her private medical practice, resigned from the Orthophrenic School, and returned to the University of Rome to study philosophy, with special emphasis on psychology and educational philosophy. She had set her sights on the education of “normal” Italian children, and she would devote all of her energies to improving it.¹⁸⁷

The Italian education system that so alarmed Montessori was, in many ways, similar to the corrupt, overcrowded, drill-oriented urban American school systems that horrified Joseph Mayer Rice in his seminal *Forum* articles of 1892 and 1893. Italian schools, however, unlike American ones, were controlled by a national Ministry of Education, which “all but strangled” them with its “ubiquitous and top-heavy bureaucracy and its endless red tape.” The same curriculum was taught in each public school, and examinations, which determined all student progress, were equally standardized. Despite this uniformity and centralization, the system reflected no consistent educational philosophy, since

186. Ibid., p. 41.

187. Montessori also had personal reasons for leaving the Orthophrenic School. She had conceived a child with her co-director, Dr. Montesano, in either 1897 or 1901. As this unclear dating indicates, the nature of her relationship with Montesano is something of a mystery; Montessori's biographer, Rita Kramer, suggests that the two may have agreed never to marry for career reasons, although Montesano married another woman in 1901. Montessori somehow kept the pregnancy a secret, and when the child, a boy named Mario, was born, he was sent away to be “discreetly brought up by a family in the countryside near Rome.” Mario was eventually reunited with his mother in 1913, but Montessori did not publicly acknowledge him as her son until much later, when her reputation was secure. See Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, pp. 92-93.

“with every new Minister of Education a change of regulations and the course of study [took] place.”

Because the Minister of Education changed frequently – one observer estimates that turnover time was around six months – students inevitably experienced gaps and needless repetitions, and graduated with fragmentary knowledge of the pet topics of various bureaucrats.¹⁸⁸ Building on the ideas she had developed at the Orthophrenic School, Montessori hoped to refocus education around concrete tasks rather than verbal tests, to allow for more variation in individual learning styles, and to prioritize the organic coherence of even a small body of knowledge over flimsy coverage of a laundry list of topics.

She got her chance in 1906, when Edoardo Talamo, the head of a Roman association for urban renewal, approached her about a school he wanted to open inside a tenement building in the dilapidated San Lorenzo neighborhood. San Lorenzo, the most extreme example of the urban poverty that had accompanied Italy's modernization, was overrun by squatters (many of them prostitutes and criminals) who lived in utter filth. Talamo's group, the *Istituto romano di beni stabili*, had bought up several buildings in the area and hoped to make them habitable and profitable. The *Beni stabili* group preferred to rent to employed married couples, “who would seem to be the most stable element of the local population”; these couples' young children, however, tended to deface property if left unsupervised. Talamo, who had a Franklinesque talent for finding the intersection of philanthropy and profit, thought that it would be in everybody's interests to open frugally administered day nurseries for these youngsters, one in each of the *Beni stabili* tenements. He approached Montessori for advice about the nurseries, and was pleasantly surprised when the *Dottoressa* offered to run the first school herself, provided that she be given absolute control over it. Although the post offered no prestige, it gave Montessori something she valued much more: the opportunity to try out her educational ideas on “normal” children without the interference of the educational bureaucracy. Talamo agreed, but made it clear that the school, which a mutual friend of Talamo's and Montessori's christened the *Casa dei*

188. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, pp. 31-32.

bambini (Children's House), would receive no funding for equipment or food. Montessori raised the needed money from wealthy women friends, and hired an uneducated forty-year-old woman, the daughter of the tenement's porter, to conduct the day-to-day operation of the school under the *Dottoressa's* "guidance and direction."¹⁸⁹

While her work at the Orthophrenic School had interested physicians and specialists in the mentally disabled, Montessori's new venture captured the imagination of professional and amateur education reformers throughout Europe and America. Since our concern is with Montessori's American vogue, for the remainder of this section, we will view her work through the lens of contemporary American journalism, beginning with Josephine Tozier's May 1911 *McClure's* article on the Children's House, which was entitled "An Educational Wonder-Worker: The Methods of Maria Montessori." The article is lavishly illustrated with over a dozen photographs of the Montessori apparatus, many of which show clean, white-frosted children either staring intently at the manipulatives or closing their eyes and touching them. "Square tablets of wood with geometrical insets which the child learns to fit into place, and squares of cardboard containing geometrical outlines to be filled in with crayon, one of the steps in learning to write," reads one photograph's caption. "The little girl at the left is learning the difference between rough and smooth by running her fingers alternately over coarse sandpaper and smooth cardboard. The boy is learning to distinguish different shapes by fitting geometrical insets into place blindfold, guided only by his sense of touch. The child at the end is distinguishing textures blindfold," runs another. A third photograph shows children "Learning to distinguish colors by arranging colored silk on card bobbins, according to gradations of shade. There are eight fundamental colors and eight shades of each color, making sixty-four bobbins in all."¹⁹⁰ Although the photographs do not provide a

189. Ibid., pp. 109-111.

190. Tozier, Josephine. "An Educational Wonder-Worker: The Methods of Maria Montessori," *McClure's Magazine*, Vol.

systematic inventory of the apparatus, they give readers a clear idea of its general purpose of isolating basic sensory and motor skills and training them with minimal adult direction.

Tozier's explanation of the principles behind the apparatus is structured around the famous “explosion into writing” that Montessori had developed at the Orthophrenic School but had perfected at the Children's House. Six of the article's sixteen pages are devoted to the miracle of “the teaching of young children to write, without the slightest strain or effort,” which Tozier calls “the most striking and impressive of Maria Montessori's achievements.”¹⁹¹ The climax of “An Educational Wonder-Worker” is the children's ecstatic discovery of a power to write that had they had developed, without their own knowledge, by practicing its constituent parts with the apparatus. One warm December day, Montessori recounts in a passage that Tozier quotes from *The Montessori Method*, the *Dottoressa* was on the roof of the San Lorenzo tenement with a small boy, watching him draw a chimney. All of a sudden, for no discernible reason, he knelt down and touched the roof with the piece of chalk he had been drawing with.

The child looked at me, smiled, remained for a moment as if on the point of bursting into some joyous act, and then cried out, 'I can write! I can write!' and kneeling down again he wrote on the pavement the word 'hand.' Then, full of enthusiasm, he wrote also 'chimney,' 'roof.' As he wrote, he continued to cry out, 'I can write! I know how to write!' His cries of joy brought the other children, who formed a circle about him, looking down at his work in stupefied amazement. Two or three of them said to me, trembling with excitement, 'Give me the chalk. I can write too.' And indeed they began to write various words: *mama, hand, John, chimney, Ada*. [...] After the first word, the children, with a species of frenzied joy, continued to write everywhere. I saw children crowding about one another at the blackboard, and behind the little ones who were standing on the floor another line would form consisting of children mounted upon chairs, so that they might write above the heads of the little ones. In a fury at being thwarted, other children, in order to find a little place where they might write, overturned the chairs upon which their companions were mounted. Others ran toward the window shutters or the door, covering them with writing. In these first days we walked upon a carpet of written signs. Daily accounts showed us that the same thing was going on at home, and some of the mothers, in order to save their pavements, and even the crust of their loaves upon which they found words written, made their children presents of *paper* and *pencil*. One of these children brought to me one day a little note-book entirely filled with writing, and the mother told me that the child had written all day long and all evening, and had gone to sleep in his bed with the paper and pencil in his hand.¹⁹²

To teach children of four and five to write at all was almost unheard of in educational circles. To do so

37, No. 1 (May 1911), 3-19.

191. Ibid., p. 15.

192. Montessori, *Montessori Method*, pp. 280-81.

so unobtrusively that the children felt that they had simply “grown old enough” to write, as if it were a natural endowment, was positively astounding. To perform this feat with poor, city-dwelling children, the objects of so much concern throughout the transatlantic culture of progressivism, made her a kind of socio-pedagogical messiah.

This incident was, in Montessori's words, “the *first time* that they had ever written[;] and they traced an entire word, as a child, when speaking for the first time, speaks the entire word.” “The child who speaks,” she goes on, “first prepares himself unconsciously, perfecting the psycho-muscular mechanism which leads to the articulation of the word. In the case of writing, the child does almost the same thing. [...] The child possesses *all* the movements necessary for writing. And written language develops not gradually, but in an explosive way; that is, the child can write *any word*.”¹⁹³ Montessori achieved this explosive effect, as we have already begun to see, by extending and biologizing the Pestalozzian principle of incremental learning. Pestalozzi distrusted broad, abstract concepts; Montessori, it sometimes seems as one reads Tozier's article, distrusted thinking itself, preferring to work as close as possible to the level of unconscious muscle memory, helping the children assimilate skills into the fabric of their nervous and muscular systems. Discussing the apparatus for teaching textures, for instance, Tozier notes that “by the cultivation of the sense of touch, reflex actions are set up in inferior nerve-centers with which the brain has little or no concern. One of Maria Montessori's chief objections to some of the most popular kindergarten employments is that they involve a harmful effort of the organs most closely associated with the brain – the eyes.”¹⁹⁴ Describing the wooden geometric insets, she observes that “the child apprehends the forms synthetically, as given entities, and is not taught to recognize them by aid of even the simplest geometrical analysis. This is a point on

193. Montessori, *Montessori Method*, p. 282.

194. Tozier, “Educational Wonder-Worker,” p. 6.

which Maria Montessori lays particular stress.”¹⁹⁵ The didactic apparatus, as a whole system, was designed to cover all the major “inferior nerve-centers” whose development was prerequisite to, on the one hand, the so-called “school arts” of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and, on the other hand, “exercises in practical life” such as dressing oneself, serving food, and washing the face and hands. All of these things, Montessori felt, should be experienced as natural extensions of the personality, not as special “accomplishments.”

Montessori's dim pedagogical view of logic and explanation, as impositions by the easily misled and addled brain on the more trustworthy inferior nerve-centers, also led her to distrust rule-bound approaches to reward and punishment. Children's behavior, she believed, should be controlled by harnessing the natural impulse to learn and grow that is most clearly expressed in their compulsion to interact with the apparatus; dunce caps and gold stickers would only distract them from that impulse. When a child begins with the texture apparatus, for instance, Tozier reports that the teacher gives her the smooth surface and says “smooth,” “slowly [and] distinctly.” “If she adds one more word, even a term of endearment, she will transgress her duty, which forbids her to run the risk of confusing her pupil. To confuse is to tax the brain, and that is a cardinal sin.”¹⁹⁶ “Why correct the child?,” Montessori asks in another passage that Tozier quotes from *The Montessori Method*. “If she does not succeed in associating the name with the object, the only way of making her succeed is to repeat at once the action of the sensorial stimulus, and the word to be associated with it; that is, to repeat the lesson. But the fact of the child having made the mistake implies that at that moment she is not disposed to the psychic association which you desire to provoke in her; hence it is best to choose another moment.”¹⁹⁷ For this reason, “wherever it is at all possible, the apparatus used in the Houses of Childhood enables, or rather

195. Ibid., p. 13.

196. Ibid., p. 7.

197. Montessori, *Montessori Method*, p. 8.

compels, the child to correct his own errors – to see at a glance whether his work 'comes out' right or wrong.”¹⁹⁸ The geometric inset apparatus, for example, has just one slot for each piece. There is almost nothing for the child to do with the pieces except replace them in their slots. There is just one correct placement for each piece, and the child will know immediately whether she has found it. To make an anachronistic comparison, the apparatus is the opposite of a set of Legos or Lincoln Logs, which encourage the open-ended exploration of possibilities. Whereas Froebelian kindergarteners used their adult imagination to devise games for children to play with blocks, Montessori “directresses” (as her teachers were known) kept their thoughts to themselves, but used materials that already encoded a narrowly prescribed range of behavior (itself the product, ultimately, of the imagination of Maria Montessori).

Of course, there was no guarantee that Montessori's pupils would choose to engage with the apparatus in the first place. Occasionally, children would disturb their classmates or generally make a nuisance of themselves. Instead of admonishing a misbehaving child, however, Montessori's response was to “place a little table in the corner of the room, and seat the child at it, with his face to the others, giving him whatever he wanted to play with.” Then, rather than lecturing the child on the error of his ways, she made him feel that, by being disruptive, he was making himself into a pitiable infant. “I myself, on entering,” Tozier quotes again from *The Montessori Method*, “would first go straight to him, caressing him like an infant; and would then turn to the others and interest myself in their work, as though they had been men.” Although Montessori claims that “I do not know what happened in their souls” during the “conversion” to good behavior that this disciplinary tactic almost always produced, even the limited picture of her methods that emerges from Tozier's article suggests a likely answer.¹⁹⁹ Montessori's whole pedagogical orientation was toward a radical version of what American educators

198. Tozier, “Educational Wonder-Worker,” p. 13.

199. Ibid., p. 10.

were calling the “doctrine of interest,” which stated that children are hard-wired with a desire to learn, and that this desire can be stoked by presenting them with appropriate stimuli. The Montessori apparatus was designed to be a maximally appropriate stimulus to the whole inventory of exploratory impulses, and Montessori's classroom practice revolved around removing foreign (i.e., adult-imposed) obstacles to its appeal. Taken in the aggregate, the various specific impulses, arising from the inferior nerve-centers, constitute a general drive, rooted in the body, below the level of conscious decision-making, toward the acquisition of adult powers. By calling attention to the problem child's dereliction of this biological duty, Montessori induces a state of deep-seated discomfort which is much more powerful than a finger-wagging lecture. Children who had been reformed by her version of the “time out” “took a pride in knowing how to work and to behave with dignity; and, for the most part, they preserved a tender affection for the mistress and for me.”²⁰⁰ Montessori would have appeared, to Tozier's readers, to have gone further than any American educator in achieving discipline without sermonizing. As we shall see, this libertarian credential would contribute greatly to her popular appeal.

Based only on two sources that we have already discussed, Tozier's “An Educational Wonder-Worker” and Fisher's *A Montessori Mother*, we can already see how Montessori seemed to answer two of the pressing educational demands of the American middle and upper classes: “to enrich the lives of their own children and to help civilize and Americanize the newly arrived urban hordes.”²⁰¹ Between May 1911 and the end of 1912, Montessori received mostly glowing coverage in *McClure's Magazine*, *American Education*, the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, the *Kindergarten Review*, *Pedagogical Seminary*, the *American Primary Teacher*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the *Woman's Home Companion*, *Good Housekeeping*, the *Dial*, *Scientific American*, the *Delineator*, and the *Contemporary*

200. Ibid.

201. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 16.

Review.²⁰² “What did Americans know of Dr. Montessori and her schools which was sufficient to cause their very enthusiastic favorable response?,” asks the historian Paul Willcott in a survey of Montessori's American reception. “They knew that the slum children of Dr. Montessori's first Casa dei Bambini had achieved remarkable things in only one year. Many of them could read and write at the age of four.” Furthermore, “they were not forced to do this, rather they were given great liberty in an environment specially structured by Dr. Montessori.”²⁰³

This latter factor, for which Montessori popularized the name “auto-education,” dovetailed with American progressive educational thought. In 1914, Walter Lippmann admonished, in *Drift and Mastery*, that “we have to prepare children to meet the unexpected”; instead of passively absorbing the ideas of their elders, “they will have to find their own facts and make their own rules, and if schools can't give them that power then schools no longer educate for the modern world.”²⁰⁴ Although Lippmann, following the lead of American progressive educators such as Dewey, emphasizes the development of a spontaneous intelligence rather than a self-determining will, the parallels with this passage from *The Montessori Method* are easy to see:

Will-power, like all other activities is invigorated and developed through methodical exercises, and all our exercises for will-power are also mental and practical. To the casual onlooker the child seems to be learning exactitude and grace of action, to be refining his senses, to be learning how to read and write; but much more profoundly he is learning how to become his own master, how to be a man of prompt and resolute will.²⁰⁵

Of course, not everyone agreed that the best way to raise self-determining adults is to let children have their own way. Indeed, the theory of mental discipline that had dominated American education for most of its history, and was still quite popular outside of elite educational circles, held just the opposite. One

202. Ibid., p. 159.

203. Willcott, Paul. “The Initial American Reception of the Montessori Method.” *The School Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (June 1968),. 147-65, p. 150.

204. Lippmann, Walter. *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914, p. 154.

205. Quoted in Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 139.

resident of North Dakota complained, in a letter to a newspaper, of Montessori's "fallacy that willpower and self-sufficiency are developed by self-indulgence." "The children are being petted and allowed to have their own way until they get an exalted idea of their importance," he warned. Another letter writer, however, responded that Montessori "teaches self-reliance and not self-indulgence, and gives full sway to the child's bent, always with a life-size picture of George B. Consequences in the background."²⁰⁶ The scientifically calibrated Montessori apparatus forces the child to find objectively correct solutions even as it frees teachers from the need to march students through a linear curriculum. Unlike the kindergarten, the Montessori school is meant to be a carefully staged arena in which children confront reality, not a land of make-believe. Indeed, Montessori education was widely perceived to be more scientific, in terms of both its design and the attitude it encouraged in its students, than other educational systems. In the 1921 poem "A Montessori Child," Montessori education is depicted as anything but self-indulgent:

I know some little girls and boys
Who play with blocks and other toys;
But no one offers toys to me
Except to use as "stimuli."

I look at children romp and shriek;
They play a game called hide-and-seek;
They run and hide, and shout and run,
And have the greatest lot of fun.

But where I go they only play
To gather knowledge day by day.
And so absorb an education
Through "muscular coordination."

They gum rough letters on a board,

206. Ibid., p. 181.

I learn them of my own accord;
I play at hide-and-seek with these,
And thus I get my A, B, C's.

Some children have a game called war.
They march lead soldiers on the floor;
But where I go it is enough
To know that things are smooth or rough.

While other children call it "fun"
To hop and skip and jump and run,
I do these things unconsciously
To set my little spirit free.

While other children merely play,
I garner wisdom every day.
I'm never up to childish tricks.
Yes, ain't I cute? I'm only six.²⁰⁷

Despite the ethic of sober industry that this poem lampoons, the North Dakotan writer was correct that the concept of submission to authority is absent from Montessori education. Regarding Froebel, Montessori once wrote that “he imposes his imagination on the child. The result is to confuse the child [...] It is false psychiatry. Not in that way was a Dante made. The imagination,” she insisted, “must be the child's.” The Washington correspondent of the London *Times* wrote, in reference to that statement, that “it may easily be imagined how an idea of that kind appeals to a people who are feverishly, though often subconsciously, trying to reconcile with the individualistic traditions of the 'free-born' citizen the paternalism implied by statutory eugenics, sex hygiene, and all the stock-in-trade of the modern Radical who would reform society.”²⁰⁸ Montessori seemed to reconcile intellectual liberty with rigor and objectivity, and an overarching scientific perspective with freedom of belief.

207. Taylor, Bert Leston. “A Montessori Child.” *A Penny Whistle: Together with the Babbette Ballads*, New York: Knopf, 1921, pp. 56-57.

208. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 203.

A populace trained in scientific habits of careful, independent observation, Montessori sometimes suggested, would not need to be watched over by the various public agencies and commissions that proliferated throughout the Progressive Era. Here she is, for example, arguing that her educational practices could make the Food and Drug Administration unnecessary:

Almost all the forms of adulteration in food stuffs are rendered possible by the torpor of the senses. [...] Fraudulent industry feeds upon the lack of sense education in the masses. [...] We often see the purchaser depending on the honesty of the merchant, or putting his faith in the company, or the label on the box. This is because purchasers are lacking in the capacity of judging directly for themselves.²⁰⁹

The Food and Drug Administration poses a number of political problems that were characteristic of the time. How could the agency be shielded from partisan meddling? How much authority should an unelected body have? What credentials would its members be expected to possess? Should individuals be allowed to move back and forth between industry and the agency? Rather than facing such problems directly, or even admitting their importance, Montessori hoped to dissolve them with science, using experimental pedagogy to create the fictional race of “omnicompetent citizens” that Lippmann identified (in *Public Opinion*) as the only people capable of thriving under a strictly laissez-faire regime. She took a similar attitude toward educational politics. Rather than reforming the Italian education system from within, she created a separate educational sphere in which her scientific principles (backed by her unquestioned personal authority) held full sway. Her impulse to use positivist science, which she portrayed as continuous with common sense, to cut the increasingly Gordian knots of Progressive-Era bureaucracy struck a chord with Americans who hoped that social coordination could be achieved without revising long-held ideas about the limitation of government.

The burden of such progressive touchstones as Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909) and Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* (1914) was that such a hope was unrealistic, and, given the pressing need for social reconstruction, downright irresponsible. In 1914, after Montessori had finished her triumphal tour of the United States, William Heard Kilpatrick, a leading disciple of Dewey's and

209. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 142.

the highly influential president of Teachers College, Columbia, published a brief attack on her, largely on these grounds, that caused the American educational establishment to turn away from her for decades to come. Kilpatrick's *The Montessori System Examined* begins by observing that Montessori, like Rousseau and Pestalozzi, believes that teachers “should tend the child as the gardener does the plant, assured that the natural endowment would properly guide its own process of unfolding.” “The child is a body which grows and a soul which develops,” he quotes from *The Montessori Method*; “we must neither mar nor stifle the mysterious powers which lie within these two forms of growth, but must *await from them* the manifestations which we know will succeed one another.”²¹⁰ While acknowledging that this doctrine of “education as development” has been a necessary corrective against the pedagogy of mental discipline, Kilpatrick indicts it for neglecting a number of important principles. The best rationale for the doctrine is that it allows children to discover who they really are, rather than having a preconceived identity imposed upon them. Identity, however, is not something that preexists in the individual; rather, it is achieved and expressed in a cultural context. Civilization, for Kilpatrick, constitutes “all the devices thus far contrived for the fullest expression of what we are,” such as “clothing, shelter, methods of procuring and preparing food,” as well as “art and literature” and “ethical concepts and legal procedure.” Education, he asserts (channeling the Dewey of *The Child and the Curriculum*), should be an “ideal reconstruction of the race achievement” through which pupils find, not their true nature, but their scientific and cultural patrimony and a map of their potential social roles.

Montessori's asocial mentality is also, Kilpatrick contends, reflected in her underuse of group work. He concedes that Montessori pupils seem quite capable of working in peaceful isolation, each at her own desk or mat, and observers such as Fisher and Tozier gave glowing accounts of their coordination in performing the small number of adult-imposed tasks in the *Casa dei Bambini*, such as serving meals and singing songs. Neither of these accomplishments, however, is preparation for

210. Kilpatrick, William Heard. *The Montessori System Examined*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914, p. 9.

democracy. “What we wish,” writes Kilpatrick, “is to put the children into such socially conditioned environment that they will of themselves spontaneously unite into larger or smaller groups to work out their life-impulses as these exist on the childish plane.”²¹¹

In addition to these criticisms of Montessori education's social value, Kilpatrick argues that, even on the individual level, it “fails to provide adequately for the most useful of modern conceptions, that of intelligent, self-directing adaptation to a novel environment.” In Lippmann's terms, it fails to educate for mastery. “If development be but the unfolding of what was from the first enfolded,” as Montessori holds, “then the adaptation is made in advance of the situation, and consequently without reference to its novel aspects. Such a form of predetermined adaptation proves successful in the case of certain insects, as the wasp; for there the environment is relatively fixed. With man, however, each generation finds – and makes – a new situation.”²¹² Montessori's comments about food inspection imply that, for her, the powers “enfolded” in each individual are so great that, if only their development could proceed without interruption, they could master all new situations as they arise. The discrepancy between the complexity of the new situations of 1914 and the simplicity and even narrowness of Montessori's training, however, strikes Kilpatrick as ludicrously wide.

Furthermore, Montessori seemed to be missing any idea of open-ended thinking. Montessori had asserted (in words that Kilpatrick quotes from *The Montessori Method*) that the didactic apparatus “contains within itself the control of error, and [thus] makes auto-education possible to each child.” Unlike a teacher trying to explain a concept, the Montessori “cylinder box” allows the child to err in any direction – trying to fit a large cylinder into a small hole, or putting cylinders in holes too large for them until only mismatched cylinders are left – and then identify and correct just the error she actually makes. Kilpatrick, however, is troubled by the fact that every item in the didactic apparatus is designed

211. Ibid., pp. 8, 20, 65.

212. Ibid., p. 10.

with exactly one solution, so that “with each piece one, and only one, line of activity is feasible.” “Any side suggestion, as improvising a wagon, is effectually suppressed,” he laments. Thus, far from being free to develop her whole nature, the Montessori child is confined to a narrow round of “very formal” tasks. To believe that “so formal and restricted a scheme” could prepare students to take the reins of an increasingly dynamic society requires “a naïve trust in a very generous transfer of training.” The phrase “transfer of training” was a loaded one, associated in the educational literature with the bogeys of faculty psychology and mental discipline. Summing up his case against her, Kilpatrick argues that “Madam Montessori's doctrine of sense-training is based on an outworn and cast-off psychological theory; that the didactic apparatus devised to carry this theory into effect is in so far worthless; that what little value remains to the apparatus could be better got from the sense-experience incidental to properly directed play with wisely chosen, but less expensive and more childlike, playthings.”²¹³

For Kilpatrick, Montessori's unique significance lies in her combination of a simplistic transfer-of-training psychology (basically, a libertarian version of the old mental discipline) with cutting-edge interests in “the freedom, self-activity, and self-education of the child” and “practical life' activities.” Kilpatrick sees this combination as a mismatch of noble, quasi-Deweyan ends with flawed, quasi-Rousseauian means. Inasmuch as she raises awareness of these ends, Montessori does education a service. By allowing her “simple procedure embodied in definite, tangible apparatus” to become a kind of popular talisman, however, while Dewey's own proposals remain little known outside of the educational establishment, she creates false expectations that Deweyan goals can be reached without the difficult reconstruction of knowledge and society that would actually be necessary. Kilpatrick's final verdict gives her credit as a popularizer and cheerleader, but little else: “Stimulating she is; a contributor to our theory, hardly, if at all.”²¹⁴ *The Montessori System Examined* ensured that no matter

213. Ibid., pp. 31-33, 52.

214. Ibid., pp. 63-66.

how popular attitudes toward Montessori might fluctuate, her ideas would not be integrated into the training of teachers and administrators in American public schools. Rather, they would survive in independent organizations such as the American Montessori Association, which continues to administer private Montessori schools to this day. Later, during the post-Sputnik educational panic of the 1950s, a renewed emphasis on science and individualism prompted some educators to revisit her ideas, and bring some of them back into the American mainstream. In terms of her influence during the Progressive Era, however, Kilpatrick's assault was decisive.

Kilpatrick's critique reflects the mismatch between Montessori and the social-action progressivism of the upper echelons of the American educational profession. The crux of the matter, as we shall see in the following sections, is that Montessori's progressivism relies on a superhuman force that naturally tends to “normalize” social life, whereas American progressive education in the Dewey/Kilpatrick vein, and American progressivism in the Croly/Lippmann/Dewey vein more broadly, insist on the centrality of human choices. In a sense, then, Kilpatrick's criticism of Montessori is the opposite of Cather's, since for Cather Montessori is, if anything, not fatalistic enough.

Montessori's Cosmic Education

In *The Montessori Method*, Montessori justified the liberty of the child on scientific grounds: we can never understand the child mind, she argued, until we see how it develops when protected from adult interference. She continued to believe that, but the longer she spent observing children, the more conclusions she was willing to draw about the true nature of the developmental process – “The Secret of Childhood,” as she titled one of her books – and its significance for politics and culture. A

comparison with Herbart may be instructive. For Herbart, the fundamental developmental process is apperception, the methodical construction of an increasingly massive edifice of increasingly interrelated knowledge. In his terminology, this is the process of “perfection.” Thus a perfect mind consists, in the words of the Herbartian Charles de Garmo, of a minimal number of “pillars of strength,” or concentrated, elaborated bodies of knowledge; the perfect society, correspondingly, is capable of unified action and administered by a centralized, systematized bureaucracy. For Herbart, the sense of beauty is an intuitive, but objective, apprehension of this quality of perfection. By refining the sense of beauty, therefore, art clarifies the course of both individual and social progress. Montessori develops an equally elaborate and all-encompassing philosophy of education, which, like Herbart's, made art the polestar of both individual and social development. While Herbart, however, favors architectural metaphors in which people and nations are painstakingly constructed from quasi-independent smaller units, Montessori uses water imagery to describe a benevolent cosmic force that flows through all life under the right conditions. Although Montessori discussed this idea most fully in later works such as *The Advanced Montessori Method* (1917) and *The Absorbent Mind* (1949), the basic conception as outlined in *The Montessori Method* is substantially unchanged. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's identification, in 1912, of the central principle of Montessori education as the “unchaining of great natural forces for good which have been kept locked and padlocked by our inertia, short-sightedness, [and] lack of confidence in human nature” remained valid throughout her long career.²¹⁵

As we have seen, Montessori's appeal stemmed, in large part, from her surprising synthesis of pedagogical libertarianism and scientific objectivity. On the one hand, she holds that child development is so idiosyncratic that it is foolish to impose a linear curriculum. On the other hand, she believes that a single set of didactic apparatus, each component of which has a single proper use, suffices for children

215. *A Montessori Mother*, p. 40.

of whatever background and temperament. Montessori reconciles these two positions by identifying individual idiosyncrasies as irregularities introduced by the outside world into a developmental process that is, according to its own internal logic, uniform. For instance, she argues in *The Absorbent Mind*, children learn to speak according to a biologically determined schedule. Nonetheless, “when the ‘word explosion’ begins, this mass of words must have an outlet. So must the sentences when – in the next stage – the child starts putting his thoughts into grammatical form.” In some cases the “normal explosion” fails to occur at the proper age, not because of physical impediments such as deafness, but for purely “psychopathological” reasons. In such cases, “it is plain that everything was already prepared in his inmost being, but that some obstacle prevented it from showing.” “A struggle, a dread, a reverse of some kind” during the phase in which “the mechanisms are being acquired for word-formation,” for instance, can cause “stammering.” Montessori’s term for these mishaps is “regressions,” and she warns that they can become “permanent inferiorit[ies]” if the child is not permitted to work through them. Since the causes of regression are unpredictable (“a reverse of some kind” can mean almost anything), Montessori believes that teachers should provide opportunities for children to practice using all of the basic sensorimotor mechanisms, but should refrain from rushing or directing them. “It is often we who obstruct the child,” she observes, “and so become responsible for anomalies that last a lifetime. Always must our treatment be as gentle as possible[.]”²¹⁶

Although regressions can occur more or less randomly at any point in the developmental process, and although an uncorrected regression can permanently warp someone’s life, the trajectory of what Montessori calls “normal” development is a biological constant. “Except when he has regressive tendencies, the child’s nature is to aim directly and energetically at functional independence,” she writes. “Development takes the form of a drive toward an ever greater independence. It is like an arrow released from the bow, which flies straight, swift and sure.” The comparison to a bow and arrow is

216. Montessori, Maria. *The Absorbent Mind*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988 (1949), pp. 118-19.

instructive, for the child's growing independence is the outcome of some preexisting impetus. The child is the arrow, but does not draw the bow. A toddler achieves greater independence by learning to walk, but he can do so only because, Montessori explains, in some unconscious way his body has been preparing to walk for a long time. "A vital force is active within him," she writes, "and this guides his efforts toward their goal."

Following the British psychologist Percy Nunn, she calls this mysterious force "*horme*," from the Greek for *impulse*. As an organizer of behavior, she writes, *horme* might be "likened to will-power," but "the idea of will is too restricted, too much a part of the individual's awareness. *Horme* belongs to life in general, to what might be called the divine urge."²¹⁷ The similarity she sees between *horme* and individual will-power indicates that she does not agree with such thinkers as Dewey, Lester Ward, or Edward A. Ross that nature is a chaotic field of forces on which the mind imposes whatever order it requires. Indeed, somewhat shockingly for a scientist of her era, she rejects the idea of random evolution altogether. "There are theories which suggest that man's will proceeds from a great universal power (*horme*), and that this universal force is not physical, but is the force of life itself in the process of evolution," she writes. "It drives every form of life irresistibly toward evolution, and from it come the impulses to action. But evolution does not occur by luck, or by chance, but is governed by fixed laws, and if man's life is an expression of that force, his behavior must be molded by it."²¹⁸

Despite her reference to "fixed laws," Montessori believes that, while *horme* can profitably be analyzed, it can never be fully understood. No matter the progress of science, human life will always run in the tracks laid down by this force, and intuitive sensitivity to its inner promptings will always be an essential factor in decision-making. Whatever the scientific or philosophical merits of this position, it reflects Montessori's own way of doing things. She decided to pursue a medical career, for instance,

217. Ibid., p. 76.

218. Ibid., p. 230.

because of a vivid dream, about which she later wrote, “there are strange things happening within us guiding us to an end we do not know.”²¹⁹ Her writings overflow with descriptions of children whose actions are both developmentally advantageous and utterly inexplicable. Of a certain pupil engrossed in the didactic apparatus, she recounts that “from the time I began to count, she repeated the exercise forty-two times. Then she stopped as if coming out of a dream and smiled happily. Her eyes shone brightly and she looked about. [...] And now, for no apparent reason, her task was finished. But what was finished and why?”²²⁰ Of language learning, she writes that “its work begins in the deepest shadows of the unconscious mind; there it is developed and the product becomes fixed. Then only does it appear in the open.” Here, Montessori generalizes her theory of developmental “explosions,” such as the famous explosion into writing. In the Josephine Tozier article discussed above, the explosion is depicted as the climax of a careful marshaling of the component tasks which, together, make up writing. Now, Montessori suggests that each component task is itself an explosion. “Visible progress does not go gradually, but in jumps,” she asserts. “At a certain time, for example, the power to pronounce syllables appears, and then for months the child utters only syllables. Externally, he seems to be making no progress, but all of a sudden, he says a word.” Indeed, any growth in human independence seems to her to stem from a “developing process,” which, like photographic “development,” is “done in the dark.” She points to “primitive peoples who live for centuries at a very low level, seemingly incapable of progress,” and cautions that “this is only the outer appearance, visible to the historian. The truth is that a continuous inner growth is taking place, which suddenly appears in a series of discoveries leading to rapid change. [...] We find explosive phenomena – as psychologists call them – which are not provoked by any teacher's action, but occur of themselves for no apparent reason.” “So,” she concludes, “we ourselves may take courage from the child's example,

219. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 34.

220. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 114.

and be willing to wait.”²²¹

Horme is beyond science, not in the Peircean or Deweyan sense that we live in an “aleatory universe” that might always surprise us, but in the sense that, while it manifests itself in the physical world, it emanates from, and directs its energies back toward, a higher plane of existence. It is rarely true, she asserts, that “the child's wish is to obtain some tangible object”; rather, “the child as a rule has for his unconscious desire, his own self-development. Hence he despises everything already attained, and yearns for that which is still to be sought for. For instance, he prefers the action of dressing himself to the state of being dressed, even finely dressed. He prefers the act of washing himself to the satisfaction of being clean: he prefers to make a little house for himself, rather than merely to own it. His own self-development is his true and almost his only pleasure.”²²² Hormic development aims only at itself; while it needs material objects to realize itself, these objects are merely incidental. The process of growth is paramount, the grown thing dispensable. “The necessity of eating is itself a proof that the matter of which our body is composed does not endure but passes like the fleeting moment,” Montessori writes in her first book, *Pedagogical Anthropology*, most of which is concerned with the weighing, measuring, feeding, and exercise of children. “And if the substance of our bodies passes in this manner, if life itself is only a continual passing away of matter, what greater symbol of its immateriality and its spirituality is there than the dinner-table?”²²³

Although *horme* is a cosmic force which permeates all of nature, it is localized in “differentiated and specialized kinds or stages” of the individual's psychophysical development. Montessori calls these smaller units hormic “nebulae,” “likening the creative energies which will guide the child to absorb

221. Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, pp. 102-03.

222. Montessori, *Montessori Method*, pp. 358-360.

223. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, pp. 100-01.

from his environment, to the starry 'nebulae' from which the heavenly bodies take their origin.” The nebulae are groups of muscles and nerves which, while insignificant in themselves, allow the child to interact with her environment and build up her identity. “Just as [the celestial] nebula, with the passing of time, changes into something more positive,” she explains, “so we can imagine the slow emergence of something not hereditary, yet produced by an instinctive tendency which *is* hereditary.” Once again, she draws her example from language learning. At first, “the child receives from the nebula of language suitable stimuli and guidance for the formation in himself of his mother tongue, which is not inborn in him, but something he finds in his environment and absorbs”; he is “able to distinguish the sounds of spoken language from other sounds and noises which reach him, all mixed together,” because *horme*, acting through evolution, has provided him with the proper mechanisms to take in, filter, and categorize sounds, although these sounds themselves are not given by heredity.²²⁴ Montessori extends the theory of nebulae forward in the life cycle, observing that, just as with language, “in the same way, he takes on the social characters and customs which make him a man belonging to his particular part of the world.” She also extends it backward, to embryology. Writing before the discovery of DNA, she asks how the the whole human body can grow from two cells. She concludes that the sperm and the egg are hormic nebulae: they are structured in such a way that, as they develop, they create some of the preconditions for further development (the other preconditions being supplied by the environment inside the womb). She places great emphasis on the parallels between embryonic development and education, coining the term “psychological embryo” to describe the life stage (early childhood) that follows that of the “physical embryo.” One way to understand her concept of *horme*, then, is as an imaginative extension of the process that weaves bodies out of cells (a process which was, at the time, scientifically impenetrable) to the weaving of minds and societies.

Horme unites separate parts into organic systems which unfold according to an inexplicable

224. Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, pp. 72-74.

internal logic, following a pattern of latency followed by explosive development. It operates on various scales: the embryo, the nebula, the mind as a whole, and, as we shall see, larger ones as well. The body's "vegetative systems," which "only help their owner to grow and exist," are a relatively simple hormic system. The body as a whole is a more complex system of which the brain is the center; but "to excel in brain-power" involves exercising the peripheral sensory and motor functions, which directly interact with the environment. "Watching a child makes it obvious that the development of his mind comes about *through* his movements," she notes (perhaps recalling the understimulated children that she met in the Roman asylums at the beginning of her career), and "the child who has less opportunity for sensory activity remains at a lower mental level." The "whole apparatus of brain, senses and muscles," then, is a "*system of relationship*, meaning that it puts man in touch with his world, living and nonliving, and therefore with other people." To develop the mind requires "movement," which modifies the environment. Or rather, it produces the environment, which Montessori understands as a symphony of motion. "Try to imagine what it would be like if every [living] thing became quite motionless," she enjoins.

If within the plants, all movement ceased, there would be no flowers and fruit. The percentage of poisonous gases in the air would increase disastrously. If all motion stopped, if the birds stayed still on the trees and all insects fell to the ground, if beasts of prey no longer roamed the wild and fish no longer swam in the water, what a frightful place this world of ours would become!

If mental activity is inextricably bound up with motion, then thinking belongs, not to the individual thinker alone, but to a global ecology.

All living things, that is, are guided by *horme*, which presides over evolution, to "other and far more distant ends" than mere self-preservation. "All creatures have assigned to them," by heredity, some "useful end": "every living being," Montessori writes, "has its own characteristic movements, and its own pre-established goals, and in creation there is a harmonious balance between all these different activities which are coordinated to achieve some purpose." This natural "purpose" is not a

conscious aim; Montessori does not share, say, Dewey's idealization of deliberately selected goals. The agent of harmony and progress is, for her, not the individual, or even the group, but the mysterious energy that directs birds to fly, plants to grow, and children to learn. When she speaks of placing education on a scientific footing, she means not simply that teachers should know the stages of childhood development, but that they should be able to locate the individual within this larger ecological frame. "To have a vision of the cosmic plan, in which every form of life depends on directed movements which have effects *beyond their conscious aim* [emphasis added], is to understand the child's work and be able to guide it better," she declares.²²⁵

"A vision" is the most one can have, since *horme* emanates from a region beyond human reason, but, for Montessori, that is enough to ground her educational philosophy. By her lights, the best human concept of the nature of *horme* is love: "The whole labor of life, which fulfills itself subject to its law and brings beings into harmony, reaches consciousness under the form of love," she writes in *The Secret of Childhood*.²²⁶ "There is nothing in the world which plays no part in the universal economy," she asserts; "and if we are endowed with spiritual riches, with aesthetic feelings and a refined conscience, it is not for ourselves, but so that these gifts shall be used for the benefit of all, and take their place in the universal economy of the spiritual life."²²⁷

If the hormic energy that directs the child to the tasks that are necessary for its development is also, if allowed to reach its full flower, the basis of cooperation among all living things, Montessori reasons, then auto-education with the didactic apparatus should produce not just sensible, competent individuals, but also "a harmonious and peaceful society and the elimination of wars." By safeguarding

225. Ibid., pp. 126-27, 134-35.

226. Quoted in Cossentino, Jacqueline. "Ritualizing Expertise: A Non-Montessorian View of the Montessori Method." *American Journal of Education*, 111:2 (2005), 211-244, p. 231.

227. Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, p. 126.

their pupils as they follow the call of *horme*, she goes on, her directresses enable the spirit of this new society to “spr[i]ng up spontaneously.” Children who immerse themselves in the didactic apparatus, and thus become free of regressions, “evolve a psychological type common to the whole of mankind [which was] invisible before, because hidden by characteristics not proper to the child,” such as those emphasized by traditional memoriter education.²²⁸ This new psychological type is characterized, in the first place, by the integration of its various physical and psychological organs. According to Montessori's theory, the various hormic nebulae are developed separately between birth and age three, and must subsequently be knitted together into a “united whole” which “has to be built up and formed by active experience in the real world, to which it is led by the laws of nature.” When children learn reading and writing by means of the didactic apparatus, for instance, they coordinate among nebulae concerned with touch, sight, sound, the movement of hands and mouth, et cetera. “If outer conditions prevent this integration from occurring,” however, the hormic energies “go on urging each of the partial formations to continue their activities apart from the others,” such that “the hand moves aimlessly; the mind wanders about far from reality; language takes pleasure in itself; the body moves clumsily.” The only way to prevent this fragmentation of the personality is to engage in a program of “constructive activity” that calls on all of the nebulae. Not every activity, for Montessori, is constructive in this sense. Some activities will be too difficult, while others will engage different sides of the self separately. The didactic apparatus, taken as a whole, is designed to facilitate a sequence of activities that “engage the child's whole personality” throughout each stage of its early development. As the child works through the various Montessori exercises, a potential trajectory from “caprice” through “disorder, timidity, and sloth,” ending in an “extra-social” (i.e., ill-socialized) personality is replaced by one that moves from “concentration” through “work, discipline, and sociability” to a “super-social” (i.e., well-socialized) personality. Montessori calls this process “normalization,” which she deems “*the most important single*

228. Ibid., pp. 3, 184.

result of our whole work.”²²⁹

The non-normalized personality, being pushed and pulled by its various fragments, is liable to become blindly impulsive, even to the point of being “delinquent” or “insane.” It cannot trust itself. To avoid self-destruction, it must surround itself with strict rules, or submit itself to the will of a wiser authority. These strategies of stricture and submission, however, inhibit the free-flowing constructive activity that leads to normalization, so Montessori banishes them from her schools. The normalized personality, on the other hand, does not need rules or overlords because it is “attracted to perfection,” and has “a *true* wish to become better” that is rooted in the mysterious promptings of *horme*. By attraction to perfection, Montessori means the drive to add something to the spiritual possessions of the human race, “doing something never before done” which will throw new light on the great cosmic ecology.

Although very few people will make as notable a contribution as the scientists, explorers, and spiritual leaders she gives as examples of perfection achieved, all normalized personalities cultivate the spirit of discovery, progress, and spiritual striving that is a necessary precondition for such achievements. This spirit is the key to Montessori's notion of classroom discipline and the larger idea of social organization that it represents. As we have seen, in early descriptions of the *Casa dei Bambini*, such as those of Tozier and Fisher, Montessori's discipline seems to rely on something like the “time out.” She seats a disruptive child in an isolated corner, and treats him with a cloying obsequiousness, “caressing him like an infant; and would then turn to the others and interest myself in their work, as though they had been men.” The child feels that others are developing their powers and he is not; his innate desire for progress, not yet corrupted, makes this feeling insufferable, and he mends his ways. In practice, however, Montessori found that such overt disciplinary measures were rarely necessary (as

229. Ibid., pp. 185-88.

even detractors such as Kilpatrick conceded); most of the time, she claims, the children socialize one another. The bonds between them are cemented by their attraction to perfection, in the form of the “admiration” of the less advanced for the more advanced, and the “protection” of the former by the latter. “Envy is unknown to little children” in their normalized state, Montessori asserts. In public schools, age segregation leads children to show off and be competitive with each other, but in the mixed-age Montessori classroom, “they are not abashed by an older child knowing more than they do, for they sense that when they are bigger their turn will come. [...] To understand what the older ones are doing fills the little ones with enthusiasm. The older ones are happy to be able to teach what they know,” since that “helps [them] understand what [they know] even better than before.” “There are no inferiority complexes, but everyone achieves a healthy normality through the mutual exchange of spiritual energy.”²³⁰

This community of “mutual exchange of spiritual energy,” which Montessori describes as “the society of little children who are guided by the magical powers of nature,” is constructed in a way that “may be compared to the work of the cells in the growth of an organism.” She calls this process “the last phase of children's unfolding, the almost divine and mysterious creation of a *social embryo*.” At this point, we have an almost complete picture of Montessori's theory of the relationship between auto-education and the (rather vague) socialism that she professed throughout her adult life. She cautions, however, that the “natural social solidarity” represented by the social embryo is not to be confused with “the organization of adult society which governs man's destinies.”²³¹ Only once the social embryo is formed, united by a cooperative effort to clear the path of hormic development, are people ready to intelligently consider questions of government, rules, and customs. Returning to a favorite image, Montessori describes the development of an organized adult society as an elaborate act

230. Ibid., pp. 206-07.

231. Ibid., pp. 212-14.

of weaving, which she characteristically breaks into a number of discrete steps. First, children are normalized, and their regressions removed, just as cotton is purified before use:

To start at the beginning, let us first consider the white tuft or 'flock' which the cotton plant produces around its seed. In social life, we must first consider the baby and the kind of home life into which he has been born. The first thing to be done with cotton is to purify it after picking, to free it from the black seeds attached to the flock, and this also is the first work to be done by children in Gandhi's rural schools. This corresponds to our work when we gather the children from their various homes and correct their defects, helping them to concentrate and to become normalized individuals.

Only then can the children form a social embryo, as cleaned cotton can be woven into a strong thread:

Now let us turn to the spinning. This, in our analogy, corresponds to the formation of the personality which is brought about by work and living in a group. This is the basis of everything. If the thread has been well spun and is strong, the cloth made from it will also be strong. The quality of the material we weave depends on the quality of the yarn. This, clearly, is the first thing to be sure of, for a tissue made of weak threads is worthless.

Then comes the moment when the threads are placed on the frame, stretched parallel without touching and held by little hooks along the sides. These form the warp for a piece of cloth, but they are not yet the cloth. Yet without the warp the cloth could not be woven. If the threads break, or get out of place, not being made fast in the same direction, the shuttle cannot pass between them. This warp corresponds to social cohesion. Preparation for human society is based on the activities of children who act, urged on by the needs of their nature, in a limited world corresponding to the frame. They end by becoming associated, all with the same end in view.

Finally, after small social embryos have been formed, they can be bound together by laws and institutions, as the warp threads can be traversed by weft threads, creating a fabric that "has an independent existence":

Now begins the real weaving when the shuttle passes between the threads and joins them, fixing them solidly together by means of the weft. This stage corresponds to the organized society of man which is ruled by laws and controlled by a government which all obey. When we have a real piece of stuff it remains intact after removal from the frame. It has an independent existence and can be used. One can make it in unlimited quantities. Men do not form a society just by having individual aims and undertaking each his own work, as the children do in our schools. The final form of human society is based on organization.

Yet the two things interpenetrate. Society does not depend entirely on organization, but also on cohesion, and of these two the second is basic and serves as foundation for the first. Good laws and good government cannot hold the mass of men together and make them act in harmony, unless the individuals themselves are orientated toward something that gives them solidarity and makes them into a group. The masses, in their turn, are more or less strong and active according to the level of development, and of inner stability, of the personalities composing them.²³²

This extended analogy suggests several things. For one, despite her Rousseauian pedagogical libertarianism and reluctance to use education to perpetuate social mores, Montessori does not imagine a good community as one bound together solely by natural inclination. She acknowledges the importance of institutions, although she was uninterested in reforms that did not originate with the

232. Ibid., pp. 215-16.

personal transfiguration of normalization. “I began as a sympathizer with political revolutionists of all kinds,” she once told fellow socialist Helen Keller. “Then I came to feel that it is the liberation of this, what we have in our hearts, that is the beginning and end of revolution.”²³³

Interlude: Education and Progress

We are now in a position to compare Montessori's ideas about the relation of education to social progress with those of our other educator protagonists. For Herbart, the cosmos is essentially unknowable. In his metaphysical writings, he declares his goal to be the identification, not of basic properties of reality, but of ontological suppositions that allow for the greatest possible understanding. Most surface phenomena, such as extension in space, color, and movement through time, he regards as higher-order outcomes of the interaction of more fundamental variables, whose true nature is inscrutable but which are best conceived as monads. Whatever reality may ultimately consist of, however, Herbart believes that the influence of some parts of it on other parts, which he calls “perturbation,” has to follow a certain set of relational laws, which he calls the “calculus,” and which can be enumerated. Indeed, a great deal of Herbart's writings consist of mathematical deduction about the calculus. For Herbart, then, order can be known in an absolute sense, although we will never know what exactly is being ordered. Furthermore, the calculus is objective, an integral part of reality; it is not man-made. The result of these conclusions is a fixation on the abstract notion of order for its own sake, which, as we saw at the beginning of this section, he identifies with “perfection” and beauty, and makes the centerpiece of his ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and pedagogy. An orderly society, in Herbart's view, can only be composed of well-ordered individuals, people for whom all knowledge is

233. Quoted in Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 196.

thoroughly interrelated, or “concentrated,” whatever it may be about. Pedagogically, he emphasizes the gradual accretion of deeply assimilated bodies of knowledge; socially, he hopes for individuals' seamless integration into a system of centralized coordination. Progress, for Herbart, means using schools and other institutions to build up the harmonic relationships described in his calculus.

For Dewey, the universe is not strictly lawful in any sense. It contains an ineradicable element of slipperiness and unpredictability, which makes it dangerous. Nonetheless, with enough experience, it can be partially understood. When experience is channeled into well-designed methods, such as those of science, it can even be well understood. These methods require communication and coordination, both within the individual mind and among different people. This coordination, however, should not take the form of a top-down system, but rather one that is sensitive to the surprising disclosures of idiosyncratic experience. Communities, therefore, should nurture cooperation and dialogue, and encourage their members to cultivate a diversity of outlooks. Education, for its part, should promote firsthand exploration, self-chosen projects, teamwork, and the framing of intellectual problems by felt needs rather than rigid programs (famously, at the Laboratory School, by teaching chemistry via the preparation of shared meals). For Dewey, people are, in practice, interdependent, a “Great Society” linked by trade, shared resources, and many other factors. In addition to the ongoing quest to understand nature, progress means turning the interdependence of the Great Society, which, left unchecked, leads to negative externalities, into the conscious cooperation of the “Great Community.”

For Montessori, reality can be observed in a fairly straightforward way, and its behavior can be described by scientific laws. These laws, however, while perhaps adequate for understanding inanimate nature, can never give us a complete picture of biological nature, whose behavior is dictated by a mysterious force that passes through the material world but originates in a higher realm. Science can discover the tracks in which it has been known to flow, but not its essence, source, or destination. The

best that science can do, for Montessori, is to clear obstacles from *horme's* known paths so that it can reveal more of itself. The didactic apparatus, whose scientific bona fides so impressed Americans from 1911 through 1914 (and, for some, beyond), is designed to accommodate a force that is essentially mystical. The school community, for Montessori, is a kind of communion in *horme*; education is more like a religion, meant to venerate something it does not purport to understand, than a profession, as most of Montessori's educational contemporaries wanted it to become. As the education scholar Jacqueline Cossentino puts it, "Montessori's educational cosmology belongs to a category of practice known as 'orthopraxis,'" meaning "correct action," as distinct from "orthodoxy," or "correct belief." Cossentino identifies the object of worship as "love," but as we have seen, for Montessori love is another word for the trajectory of *horme*. "As encoded in the Montessori method, the practice of love is framed" by rituals in which "concentration is the cornerstone of both attention and growth," "coordination is necessary for both sensory-motor development and graceful social interaction," and "order in human activity is both a reflection and a means of sustaining the natural order of the universe."²³⁴ The goal of Montessori's orthopraxis is not to build anything, in the manner of Herbart and his architectural metaphors; nor is it to assert rational control over human unruliness, in the manner of the faculty psychologists; nor to facilitate the exchange of experience, in the manner of Dewey; it is to create a protected channel for hormic energy. Progress means letting that energy flow farther than it has in the past.

The Iridescent Shell: Montessori on Art

In this section we will examine Montessori's ideas about art, which we will approach via her

234. Cossentino, "Ritualizing Expertise," p. 233.

discussions of abstraction and imagination. Abstraction, for Montessori, is not as simple as mere generalization. Rather, it involves a special process of mental compression that can only be performed by what she calls the “absorbent mind.” The child does not respond to environmental stimuli in the same way as adults, she argues. He has “a power of such intense sensitivity that the things which surround him in the environment awaken in him an intense interest and such a great enthusiasm that they seem to penetrate into his very life.” We adults “may admire an environment,” or “remember an environment,” but “the child absorbs it into himself. He does not remember the things that he sees, but he forms with these things part of his psyche.” Once again, Montessori uses language acquisition to illustrate her point. The child is surrounded by an infinitude of noises, she observes, but somehow he picks out the sounds of language. Such a feat, she argues (anticipating Noam Chomsky's much later work on universal grammar), would be too much for a rational mind starting from a *tabula rasa*. The child must, therefore, be pre-equipped with special receptive organs, “invisible fibres within the body that begin to vibrate in order to reproduce those sounds” that they are designed to detect. These organs are, as we have seen, Montessori's hormic nebulae. Through them, “transformations take place” in the child: his psychophysical organism is recalibrated in response to the environment. “This special kind of vital memory, that does not remember consciously, but absorbs images into the very life of the individual has received from the psychologists a special name,” Montessori writes; “they have called it *Mneme*” (from the Greek for *memory*). Through *Mneme*, things in the environment (in this case, sounds) become not just contents, but components of the child's mind.²³⁵ *Mneme* adds new significance to Montessori's sense-training program. The lessons on the difference between smooth and rough, for instance, become more than exercises for some abstract faculty of observation. The child does not comprehend, but rather absorbs, the smooth/rough distinction, making it a part of her mind, a filter that will be imposed on perception throughout her life. Smooth/rough, along with “such tiny

235. Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, pp. 22-24, 56-57.

differences as those which occur between the forms of leaves, the colours of flowers, or the bodies of insects,” and the whole range of distinctions targeted by the didactic apparatus (long/short, more/fewer, et cetera), become an “alphabet of qualities” with which all things are mentally categorized, just as all written words are categorized in the alphabet of letters. The apparatus is thus a system of “*materialized abstractions*” that gives the child a particularly useful alphabet of qualities.

By “abstractions,” Montessori means mental constructs, “limited in number,” that allow people to navigate a world in which “the real things we encounter are innumerable.” Real objects might have any texture, but texture cannot be understood without simplified terms such as *smooth* and *rough*. Abstraction compresses reality, but also “gives us our bearings [...] just as a watch gives us our bearings in time.” (Without abstractions, the mind is not liberated, but merely lost, reduced to the level of the “higher animals.”) *Smooth* and *rough* are abstractions that children absorb individually. Other abstractions, however, are absorbed by the social embryo, as alphabets of customs, morals, and religion – that is, as patterns of culture. “Culture,” writes Montessori, is, like language, “not just a matter of accumulating information”; “it implies an extension of the personality.”²³⁶

Abstractions organize everything that goes on in the mind. Not just physical sensations, but also the “spiritual needs of the human species” that bubble up from the unconscious, can only be integrated into the personality via some alphabet. Of particular importance to Montessori are the primal, supra-intellectual feelings of “adoration,” “wonder,” and “gratitude” toward nature that undergird her orthopraxic religion of love. These emotional orientations toward the cosmos, which are so essential to the striving for perfection that Montessori identifies with the normalized personality, can only be processed once they are affixed to sensible “emblems,” such as religious icons. Through these emblems, “the mind can succeed in expressing infinite immensities in a determinate form.”²³⁷ Without

236. Ibid., pp. 167-68.

237. Ibid., pp. 171-72.

them, the unexpressed inner “immensities” become isolated, and thus give rise to regressionss.

Emblems differ from materialized abstractions such as the smooth/rough apparatus because they are fruits of the “imagination,” which Montessori defines as the power “to think of things not immediately present” to the senses (nor, it seems from her usage, to memory). Because *horme* itself is always greater than its material manifestations, imagination is a necessary companion on the normalized personality's quest for perfection (the expansion of humanity's understanding of *horme*). Religious perfection, for instance, might involve the creation of a new emblem, which would involve the following steps. First, *horme* furnishes humanity with religious feelings that cannot be expressed with existing objects. Then imagination invents a new image through which those feelings can be absorbed. Finally, abstraction surveys the new image (which it can do, according to Montessori, “much as happens with sensorial impressions”) and isolates the general “qualities” by which they can be linked to the rest of mental life. To contrive a simple example: *horme* supplies a forest-dwelling people with a feeling of wonder about their natural environment; the imagination, responding to this unconscious impulse, conjures up fairies; and finally, abstraction integrates the fairies into the people's cosmology and system of values, producing a coherent religious culture.

Although this example might appear to meet Montessori's criteria for the pursuit of perfection, it relies on what she regards as a defective kind of imagination. For although imagination is concerned with that which we do not directly know, it must be faithful to the reality of that which we do know. From Montessori's wide-ranging discussions of the imagination, four categories may be abstracted, which we can label the frivolous, the superstitious, the scientific, and the artistic. Each variety can be described in terms of its treatment of, on the one hand, the hidden materials of the unconscious, and, on the other hand, objective reality. The frivolous imagination is anchored neither to the unconscious nor to reality; it is mere “unbridled divagation of the fancy” among the assorted “images of light, colour,

[and] sounds” furnished by the senses. While harmless enough, it leads nowhere. The superstitious imagination, meanwhile, deals with legitimate unconscious promptings, but does so by imagining violations of the laws of nature. Thus it pits feeling against reason, and disintegrates the personality. Montessori regards superstition as an evil to be eradicated; she is particularly scathing about the *Befana*, a witch who scares children on Christmas in Italian folklore. More surprisingly, perhaps, she is similarly critical of all forms of make-believe, or, as she puts it, “attribut[ing] characteristics to objects which do not possess them,” such as a child “whipping his father's walking-stick, as if he were mounted upon a real horse.”²³⁸ Discussing this example, she takes her usual jab at Froebel, with his games in which blocks stand for horses and the like. Such “illusions,” Montessori contends, arise when there is no better outlet for our desires. “If a poor man, a beggar, had nothing but dry bread to eat, and if he placed himself by the grated window of a rich underground kitchen because when he smelt its savoury odours he imagined himself to be eating excellent dishes together with his bread, who could prevent him?,” she asks. “But no one would say that in order to develop the imaginative activity of the fortunate persons for whom the actual dishes were destined, it would be well to take away their meat and give them bread and fragrance.”²³⁹

In contrast to the frivolous and superstitious forms of the imagination, the “imagination of science is based upon truth.” The scientific imagination devises new arrangements of the material world which are consistent with what is already known about it. When a scientist desires a better mode of transportation, she does not pretend to ride a walking-stick; she recombines real things until they meet her need. Unlike the previously discussed forms of imagination, the scientific brings new things into the world. “When man loses himself in mere speculations,” Montessori asserts, “his environment will remain unchanged, but when imagination starts from contact with reality, thought begins to construct

238. Montessori, Maria. *The Advanced Montessori Method*. Cambridge, MA: R. Bentley, 1964, pp. 191, 198.

239. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99.

works by means of which the external world becomes transformed; almost as if the thought of man had assumed a marvellous power: the power to create.” The scientific imagination's fidelity to reality does not limit its scope, but rather expands it by exposing it to the surprising workings of nature. “If a century ago some one had told the men who were travelling in stage-coaches and using oil-lamps that some day New York would blaze with light at midnight; that men would ask for succour in mid-ocean and that their message would be understood on land; that their flight in the air would surpass that of the eagle,” writes Montessori, “our good forefathers would have smiled incredulously. Their imaginations would never have been able to conceive these things. [...] This is because the imagination of modern men is based upon the positive researches of science, whereas the men of past ages allowed their minds to wander in the world of unreality.”²⁴⁰ The scientific imagination, however, does not interact with the unconscious. When an educated person reads an account of a scientific discovery, Montessori notes, she may think to herself that, if she had known all the facts that the scientist knew, she could have reached the same conclusion. Although science leads humanity into the mysteries of nature, as a method it is not mysterious at all. It operates in the sunlit, conscious regions of the mind that are visible to everybody.

Not so with the highest form of the imagination, the artistic. Whereas anyone can potentially become a scientist, the artist must be uniquely receptive to hints about what is taking place in what Montessori calls the photographic “darkroom” of the unconscious. The artistic imagination shares with the scientific a scrupulous respect for reality, but differs from it in its insight into the mind's primitive materials. While it relies on science, therefore, it ultimately surpasses it. “Like the tiny bird which hid under the wing of an eagle about to soar and when it had been thus borne up to an immense height, disengaged itself from the eagle and began to fly still higher by its own efforts,” Montessori writes, “so too is man, who at first holds fast to Nature, attaches himself to her by means of the most severe

240. Ibid., p. 186.

speculations, and with her soars aloft in search of truth; then he disengages himself from her and his imagination creates over and above Nature herself.” As this metaphor suggests, even though the artistic imagination (the tiny bird) rises higher than science (the eagle), it does so by first submitting itself to its tutelage. “All men should come under the influence of the scientific method,” Montessori goes on, “and every child should be able to experiment at first hand, to observe and put himself in contact with reality. Thus the flights of the imagination will start from a higher plane henceforth, and the intelligence will be directed into its natural channels of creation.”²⁴¹ By this, Montessori does not mean that all art should be realistic. Throughout her career, her stock example of a great literary artist is Dante. What she means, rather, is that the artist should use images that reflect a close study of reality. For instance, she admires a poet who compares domestic staff agitated upon learning of their employer's return to a pack of hunting dogs who have just sighted the fox. The poet illuminates human behavior by means of a precisely observed image. Had the poet misunderstood either the servants or the dogs, the lines would have been a failure. By succeeding, he has given humanity an emblem that illuminates its own inner depths, leading to a greater understanding of the mysteries of *horme*. This emblem, the fruit of his unique perspective, will be absorbed by future generations. Such “products of the higher imagination” will become “the environment in which the intelligence of [a future] child is destined to form itself,” and the baseline of human knowledge will be raised. The work of art, writes Montessori, is a “creation of the inner man” that “enfolds him and protects his spirit in its intellectual needs, just as the iridescent shell encloses the mollusk. In addition to the work of observing material reality, there is a creative work which lifts man up from earth and transports him into a higher world.”²⁴²

How, then, can the artistic imagination be educated? In the first place, Montessori argues, “the

241. Ibid., pp. 187-89.

242. Ibid., p. 189, 197.

sensory education which prepares for the accurate perception of all the differential details in the qualities of things [...] helps us to collect from the external world the material for the imagination.”²⁴³ Furthermore, “the exercise of the intelligence, reasoning within sharply defined limits, and distinguishing one thing from another, prepares a cement for imaginative constructions; because these are the more beautiful the more closely they are united to a form, and the more logical they are in the association of individual images. The fancy which exaggerates and invents coarsely does not but the child on the right road.”²⁴⁴ Above all, art can only flourish in a protected environment. Throughout history, Montessori observes, art is found “scattered like crumbs of gold wherever there was an intensity of civil life, wherever the intelligence had time to mature in peace.” Wherever this minimal level of security has been attained, “we find local artistic types of work, of furniture, of poetic songs and popular music.”²⁴⁵ Montessori's whole theory of education is built upon this notion of protecting the mind so that it may “mature in peace”; that is how she advances the education of the senses, the development of scientific intelligence, and the formation of a peaceful society. The education of the artist, then, can be seen as the (only occasionally achieved) climax of her program. “A true preparation” for the artistic life, she writes, “digs the beds where the waters which well up from [the mind] will flow in smiling or majestic rivers, without overflowing and so destroying the beauty of internal order. In the matter of causing the springing up of these rushing waters of internal creation we are powerless. 'Never to obstruct the spontaneous outburst of an activity, even though it springs forth like the humble trickle of some almost invisible source,' and 'to wait' – this is our task.”²⁴⁶

243. Ibid., p. 191.

244. Ibid., pp. 194-96.

245. Ibid., p. 189.

246. Ibid., p. 196.

Montessori's Casa and Cather's Mesa

In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore Willa Cather's ideas about what art is, how it can be nurtured at the individual and social levels, and what it has to do with personal growth and social progress. As we shall see, Cather often echoes, but ultimately diverges from, Montessori's conclusions about these questions. For Montessori, art is the creation, by a combination of observation and introspection, of a new container for the cosmic force that surges through all things, an “iridescent shell” secreted by *horme* for its own lodging. The wellspring of artistic talent is too profound to be completely described, and thus it can never be deliberately created. People can, however, draw it out by creating the right physical, social, and psychological environment, an act which Montessori likens to building an irrigation system. In the ideal environment, people concentrate on self-imposed tasks. This concentration is encouraged by three conditions. First, the learner must be protected: coercion of the body, the mind, or the imagination is prohibited, by mutual agreement when possible and otherwise by the intervention of a benevolent authority figure (in Montessori schools, the directress). The social corollaries of this condition, for Montessori, are pacifism and cultural libertarianism (especially the separation of church and state and the ending of restrictions on women's roles). Second, the learner must be provisioned: the environment is to be rich in objects that have been found to inspire precise observation and constructive activity. The social corollary of this condition is universal respect for science, whose practice disciplines the imagination and whose findings clarify the conditions under which natural energies can be brought to fruition. Third, the learner must not be spoiled: people are discouraged from doing things for others that they might learn to do for themselves. The social corollaries of this condition are, proximately, parenting and management styles that encourage self-reliance, and distantly, socialism, which would abolish the mutual dependency of master/servant

relationships.

Cather, too, imagines a both nature and the human mind as vehicles in which a cosmic force can be channeled, but not quite controlled. As we have seen, Cather experienced the composition of *O Pioneers!* as a ride on “a horse that knew the way.” Alexandra Bergson has a parallel experience, thriving on the Nebraska Divide by tapping into a pervading energy, personified by the “Genius of the Divide,” whose drift she can discern but which has an inscrutable mind of its own. When her brother Lou doubts that the Divide will yield a better crop than the river country to the south, she tells him, “You’ll have to take my word for it. I *know*, that’s all. When you drive about over the country you can feel it coming.”²⁴⁷ Although Alexandra cannot explain what she knows in rational terms, she senses that the natural processes that she hopes to harness are guided neither by special providence (as evidenced by the agriculture failure of Ivar, a devout hermit) nor by blind chance (the view of Carl Linstrum, also a bad farmer); rather, they operate in accordance with some overarching rule. After staking her inheritance on the Divide, Alexandra stares at the stars as they make their “ordered march” through the heavens. “It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature” and to contemplate the “law that lay behind them.”²⁴⁸

Nature’s plan, however, has not yet revealed enough of itself to be completely understood. When Alexandra disagrees with Lou about whether to build a new feed silo, rather than claiming to know better than her brother, she simply says, “well, the only way we can find out is to try.” When her assistant objects, she replies that “Lou and I have different notions about feeding stock, and that’s a good thing [...] It’s bad if all the members of a family think alike. They never get anywhere. Lou can learn by my mistakes and I can learn by his.”²⁴⁹ In a similar spirit of tolerance and experimentation, she

247. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, p. 40.

248. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

249. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

takes Ivar in when her conniving brothers plot to have the eccentric old man committed. In her personal deportment, too, Alexandra is, much like a Montessori directress, always “armored in calm,” slow to anger and sparing of both praise and blame. Nonetheless, nature does allow itself to be known well enough to act. Once she discovers how to unleash the energies of whatever falls under her protection, she moves decisively. Although she shrugs off conventional ideas about farming and social propriety, “order and fine arrangement” are “manifest all over the great farm.”²⁵⁰

In many respects, then, life on the Bergson farm illustrates the Montessori philosophy in action. (Although later we will discuss Alexandra's shortcomings as her youngest brother's guardian.) Similar environments appear in later Cather works as well. Thea Kronborg's childhood home life, for instance, sounds like Fisher's ideal in *A Montessori Mother*. “Mrs. Kronborg's children,” we learn, “were all trained to dress themselves at the earliest possible age, to make their own beds, – the boys as well as the girls, – to take care of their clothes, to eat what was given them, and to keep out of the way.” Thea's mother runs a tight ship (“to see the young Kronborgs headed for Sunday-School was like watching a military drill”) and, like a Montessori directress, maintains a clean, well-ordered, well-stocked home in which all the children have the liberty and resources to follow their inclinations. Mrs. Kronborg “let her children's minds alone. She did not pry into their thoughts or nag them. She respected them as individuals, and outside of the house they had a great deal of liberty. But their communal life was definitely ordered.”²⁵¹ Thea's artistic spirit thrives in this atmosphere of hard work and freedom of thought. In Chicago, her teacher Harsanyi observes that, far from trying to imitate existing styles, Thea makes artistic progress by following an inner impulse that she does not understand. She “had never heard a symphony orchestra. The literature of the piano was an undiscovered world to her.” “How she had been able to work so hard when she knew so little of what she was working toward,” Harsanyi

250. Ibid., p. 49.

251. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 20.

cannot fathom.²⁵² Part of the explanation, perhaps, is that thanks to her mother she has learned to use her imagination autonomously. Later, when Thea clarifies her artistic vision at Panther Canyon, she is sheltered by hardy Navajo pines that seem to be her mother's kindred spirits. "The Navajos are not much in the habit of giving or of asking help," the novel's talky narrator vouchsafes. "Their language is not a communicative one, and they never attempt an interchange of personality in speech. Over their forests there is the same inexorable reserve. Each tree has its exalted power to bear."²⁵³ The canyon itself is mainly significant as a physical, social, and spiritual shelter in which Thea can stop "hurrying from one task to another" (like a typical American public school student) and refine her "power of sustained sensation" and "faculty of observation" (like a normalized Montessori student) with a didactic apparatus of swallows, dwarf cedars, and cicadas.²⁵⁴

Perhaps the ultimate Montessori environment in Cather's fiction is *The Professor's House's* Blue Mesa, Panther Canyon's more fully realized successor. Of the native people who once dwelt there, Tom Outland's old mentor Father Duchene writes, "I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people. Perhaps they were not so when they first came upon this mesa, but in an orderly and secure life they developed considerably the arts of peace," such as architecture, astronomy, and pottery. Some of their geometrical decorations are even, according to Duchene, "identical" to ancient Cretan designs, as though there were patterns in the human mind waiting to be developed wherever there was peace and safety, whether safeguarded by the high walls of a desert mesa or the waters surrounding a Mediterranean island. Recall Montessori: "Wherever there was an intensity of civil life, wherever the intelligence had time to mature in peace, we find local artistic types of work, of furniture, of poetic songs and popular music. This multiform creation of the inner man enfolds and protects his spirit in its

252. Ibid., p. 152.

253. Ibid., p. 251.

254. Ibid., pp. 255-56.

intellectual needs, just as the iridescent shell encloses the mollusk.” While the youthful Outland is initially awed, Bartley Alexander-like, by the architectural excellence of the Cliff People's mysterious watchtower, the weathered old priest is most struck by their “natural yearning for order and security,” physical and spiritual: “I see them here, isolated, cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead;” and, he adds, “protecting the children.”²⁵⁵ The tower is a fruit of these more fundamental virtues. The Mesa, in turn, invites comparison with the various strongholds in which Godfrey St. Peter tries to develop his own “arts of peace,” such as his walled French garden, “a tidy half-acre of glistening gravel and glistening shrubs and bright flowers,” and the inviolable study, perched above the world of incessant conflict, in which he does his own monumental work.²⁵⁶

Disgusting Vitality and Impossible Things

These similarities are striking, but while Montessori is an optimist, and imagines a cosmos benevolent toward human aspirations, Cather is, if not a pessimist, in certain moods at least a stoic. The cosmic force that surges through her people and places is not Montessori's *horme*, but something much more ambivalent, which Cather calls Desire. (In *The Professor's House* she uses the capital *D*, and we will follow that example.) The difference between *horme* and Desire represents the “second degree” in the relationship of “*Bildung* to the second degree” that Cather maintains toward Montessori. *Horme* exists above and behind material reality, but manifests itself (as its name suggests) in the impulses of

255. Cather, *Professor's House*, pp. 197-98.

256. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

material bodies, the “characteristic movements” and “pre-established goals” of “every living being.” It is, then, not so much separate from materiality as excessive over it, incorporating it but keeping part of itself back, for lack of adequate means of embodiment. Cather's cosmic force stands in much the same relationship to the world. Lying awake in her attic room one night, a teenage Thea, “pulsing with ardor and anticipation” for the artistic career that awaits her, feels “life” “rush[ing] from within” her “youthful body,” a restless energy that fills her with “a desire to run and run about those quiet streets until she wore out her shoes, or wore out the streets themselves.” Her body is barely able to contain the power that stirs inside it: “her chest ached and it seemed as if her heart were spreading all over the desert.” “On such nights,” Thea intuitively “the thing that old Dumas meant when he told the Romanticists that to make a drama he needed but one passion and four walls,” one driving force and the people, places, and things that strive to embody, contain, or suppress it.²⁵⁷

Dumas's dictum suggests that art arises from the cosmic force's excessiveness over reality in a different way than it does for Montessori. For the *Dottoressa*, *horme* calls humanity onward and upward, on a quest for “perfection” that, using the scientific and artistic imagination, gradually brings reality into better harmony with the divine plan. Reality will never catch up with *horme*, any more than a northbound ship will reach the North Star, but that is no cause for distress. For Cather, on the other hand, the impossibility of ever doing full justice to the cosmic force suggests that Desire and everyday life are incommensurable. Where Montessori sees existing realities as “the beds where the waters which well up from [the mind] will flow,” Cather sees them as “four walls”; where Montessori sees a channel, Cather sees a box which is liable to burst from the pressure of what it contains. “Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires,” declares Thea's childhood teacher, Professor Wunsch (German: *wish*). “The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing – desire.

257. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 124.

And before it, when it is big, all is little.”²⁵⁸

In Wunsch's description, Desire is unruly, capable of sweeping the world before it. If the full realization of Montessori's *horme* would be a circulatory system, or irrigation network, that nourishes all living things, the full realization of Cather's Desire would be more like an apocalyptic flood. If *horme* unfettered generates peace and order, Desire unfettered is a darker, more chaotic prospect. This much, indeed, has been clear to many critics, such as Sharon O'Brien and Susan Rosowski, who have traced the manifestations of unconscious (lowercase *d*) desire in Cather's fiction. Consider, for instance, O'Brien's persuasive reading of the “Stone Lips” episode of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Bishop Latour and his native guide Jacinto, seeking shelter from a storm, enter a cave in whose recesses is a chamber that emits a “fetid odor” and a “terrible” noise, like a “great underground river,” which sounds like one of “the oldest voices of the earth.” The cave makes Latour, who normally feels at home in the desert landscape, uneasy, and Jacinto, with an air of nervously concealing something, walls up the entrance to the inner chamber with rocks. Before setting off with Jacinto, Latour has learned that early European explorers believed that his companion's tribe “kept rattlesnakes concealed in their houses, and somewhere in the mountain guarded an enormous serpent which they brought to the pueblo for certain feasts.” “It was said that they sacrificed young babies to the great snake,” the legend runs, “and thus diminished their numbers.” For the bishop, the cave and its hidden depths suggest, in O'Brien's words, “something fearful that he has not incorporated into his waking life”; this something is connected with “Indian rituals, serpent-worship, the unfamiliar,” and a “matriarchal power” that is associated with both life (as suggested by the cave's womb-like structure) and, I would add to O'Brien's reading, death (as suggested by the mention of infanticide). In *O Pioneers!*, as O'Brien notes, Alexandra's soul is likened to an underground river, invisibly feeding her farm; here, the “rushing

258. Ibid., p. 69.

waters of internal creation” (Montessori's phrase) are also a force of destruction.²⁵⁹ Although Cather's fiction contains many environments that resemble Montessori schools in their power to channel benevolent vital forces, these sanctuaries are always shadowed by what the novelist calls, describing the rattlesnake in *My Ántonia*, “disgusting vitality.”²⁶⁰ Desire completely unfettered, for Cather, is not to be trusted.

One important strand of Cather scholarship reads this recurring interest in monstrous desire in light of the novelist's abandonment of the queer identity that she developed in her high school and college years, during which she dressed in men's clothes, sported a crew cut, and signed herself “William Cather.” Although a careful interpretation of sexuality in Cather's life and work is beyond the scope of this chapter, it may be enough for our purposes to observe that, by 1912, she had sworn off any affiliation with sexual radicalism, and indeed with radicalism of any kind. As early as 1896, in fact, she wrote that it was necessary to renounce unruly desires in all areas of life, from aesthetics to politics to sexuality (or so I read her reference to the impossibility of “def[y]ing nature”):

In its essence Bohemianism is a rebellion against all organized powers, and that in itself is a defeat, for victory is with the organized powers of the universe. A man begins by defying the accepted standards of art; if he is a great man, he will stop there, and if he is a very great man he will revolutionize art. If he is a weak man and can accomplish nothing by his objections generally he goes further and defies the accepted standards of social government ... He may even go further and defy the accepted ethical standards without utter destruction for sometimes the wicked do prosper. But if he goes so far, he never stops there. He takes the last inevitable step and defies nature; then he goes out like a candle in a whiff of wind. He does not even leave a smoke, a name, a memory. He attains absolute annihilation and the cycle of Bohemianism is completed.²⁶¹

Although Cather's decision to conceal her homosexuality is a likely subtext for these remarks, in her fiction she often depicts self-denial as universal necessity. In *O Pioneers!*, for instance, the pious Ivar explains that he forgoes shoes so that the energies that he does not allow to manifest elsewhere in his body can escape through his feet:

259. O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, p. 203.

260. Cather, *My Ántonia*, p. 40.

261. Quoted in Love, Heather. “The Lure of Impossible Things.” *A New Literary History of America*. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 520.

From my youth up I have had a strong, rebellious body, and have been subject to every kind of temptation. Even in age my temptations are prolonged. It was necessary to make some allowances; and the feet, as I understand it, are free members. [...] The hands, the tongue, the eyes, the heart, all the bodily desires we are commanded to subdue; but the feet are free members. I indulge them without harm to any one, even to trampling in filth when my desires are low. They are quickly cleaned again.²⁶²

Despite his claim to suffer from “every kind of temptation,” Ivar's desires seem to be very modest: to wash himself in an old-fashioned bathtub, to pray frequently, to heal animals, and to feel the earth between his toes. Setting aside a harmless escape valve for whatever forbidden inclinations he does have, however, gives him peace of mind. This kind of self-denial or deliberate channeling of vital energies into safely trivial outlets is foreign to Montessori education; Montessori sees such behavior only as “regressive.”

His opposite number, in this respect, is Emil Bergson, who nurses a star-crossed infatuation with his married neighbor, Marie Shabata. Emil will not be soothed by bare feet. Rather, he craves something that is incompatible with the whole social and moral system, the “organized powers,” of his home region, and he sees no way forward. As lovesickness sets in, he tells Marie (to whom he has not yet confessed his feelings), “sometimes I want to pull the four corners of the Divide together [...] so, like a table-cloth. I get tired of seeing men and horses going up and down, up and down.”²⁶³ For Emil, the only way to liberate the force of Desire would be to obliterate the sphere of everyday life; and indeed, after trying to hide from his feelings in Mexico City for a time, he returns to initiate the affair that will lead to his and Marie's death, and shatter the social world of the Divide.

If Ivar's dark desires seem more theoretical than real, Emil's, perhaps, seem accidental, even avoidable. It is his particular love object that dooms him, one might argue, and not unchecked passion per se. His attraction to Marie, however, stems from qualities of hers that pertain to Cather's broader imagination of Desire. Marie is “warm-hearted and impulsive,” friendly toward everybody; according

262. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, p. 154.

263. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

to Carl, she is “too beautiful, too full of life and love” not to attract people who feel a sense of inner emptiness, such as Frank and Emil. Such people come to her “as people go to a warm fire in winter.” She is not, however, a figure of liberated energies, like Alexandra. Rather, she is defined by her lifelong confinement. As a young child, the favorite of her elderly father, she is dressed in the doll-like “Kate Greenaway” style and kept indoors. When her father learns that the unreliable Frank intends to marry her, he sends her off to a convent. After she leaves and marries Frank, he grows jealous and draws her into his emotional world, his “unhappy temperament [...] like a cage.” These physical and psychological prisons are, moreover, merely synecdoches for the more fundamental problem of Desire’s entrapment within reality itself. “The years seemed to stretch before her like the land,” Marie muses, toward the end of *O Pioneers!*; “spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little trees, the patient lives; always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain – until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman, who might cautiously be released.” With “her face lifted toward the remote, inaccessible evening star,” she sees in the heavens not Alexandra’s “orderly march” of benevolent energies, but a goal that can never be reached.²⁶⁴

In this respect Marie is a kindred spirit of the young, frustrated Thea Kronborg, who exclaims, “I only want impossible things [...] The others don't interest me.” Whereas Thea uses the power of art to meet the impossible demands of Desire, however, Marie is perpetually tortured by the discrepancy between her “yearning” and the strictures of civilization. She admires trees, she tells her impatient suitor, Emil, “because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.” The strength of her passions, her ability to “give her whole heart,” makes Marie especially aware of the walls that frustrate them, and of the resulting need for renunciation. Temperamentally, however, she is not cut out to be an ascetic; rather, like Isolde from the Wagner opera that Cather so admired, she

264. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, pp. 86, 137.

accepts that Desire can realize itself only by courting death. When she and Emil finally consummate their affair and the jealous Frank shoots the lovers, Marie dies, embracing Emil, “in an easy and natural position,” with “a look of ineffable content” on her face.²⁶⁵

Marie is a fitting object of Emil's passion because, in her commitment to impossible things, she represents one logical conclusion of his own line of emotional development. If Alexandra Bergson is akin to a Montessori directress, Emil is her prize student, whose energies she liberates along with those of the Divide itself. Although Emil does odd jobs around the farm (much as Montessori encouraged her students to keep plants and animals), Alexandra shelters him from the hard struggle for agricultural efficiency that has made Lou and Oscar, the middle Bergson siblings, mentally “stiff.” “Yes,” Alexandra thinks to herself when the college-educated Emil returns from Mexico with tales of the wide world, “it had been worth while; both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father's children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil.”²⁶⁶ Emil “shall do whatever he wants to,” she tells Carl Linstrum. “He is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for.” She gives Emil the resources, protection, and autonomy necessary for him to become, in Marie Shabata's Montessoriesque phrase, “big and free.”²⁶⁷ Alexandra's experiment achieves several Montessori goals. Emil develops with neither envy (unlike Lou) nor docile dependence on other people's direction (unlike Oscar). He becomes captain of the University of Nebraska track team, a marvel of bodily coordination. That he also has academic success is suggested by the ease with which he finds a position in an Omaha law office. From the moment that Alexandra takes charge of him, Emil has become increasingly capable. “There are so many, many things you can do,” Marie tells him while he is still in college.

265. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 209; Cather, *O Pioneers!*, pp. 23, 60, 89.

266. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, p. 118.

267. *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 65, 126.

“Almost anything you choose.”

To which Emil sardonically replies, “And there are so many, many things I can't do.” By shielding him from unnecessary obstacles, setting him to tasks such as farm chores, mowing the graveyard, and attending college, but never giving him practical or ethical guidance, Alexandra has escorted Emil's unfolding spirit to the brink of an undiscovered higher realm of development, in which he will express human potentialities that she cannot yet imagine. If these potentialities are dangerous or tragic – if they involve “disgusting vitality” or fixation on “impossible things” – Emil must reckon with them on his own. Lou and Oscar, preoccupied with the immediate difficulties of their farms, do not understand such problems. Ivar, perhaps, does understand, but he expresses this knowledge only in harmless rituals of askesis and indulgence, a private code which Emil cannot read. Only Marie visibly acknowledges that, to return to Wunsch's dictum, before the demands of Desire, “the world is little, people are little, human life is little.” Emil's love for her represents a desire to affirm the bigness of his own passions, their incommensurability with, not just Lou and Oscar's petty round, but even his own unusually broad range of possible futures.

Cather's fiction is full of characters who likewise face what Susan Rosowski diagnoses as the essentially Romantic problem of a disjunction between the “synthesizing or creative powers” of the human spirit and the “alien or meaningless material world,” between the one passion and the four walls.²⁶⁸ Some, like Emil and Marie, choose to break against the rocks of reality rather than restrain their Desire. Others, like Ivar, create a kind of play space, within an otherwise repressed life, in which Desire can be harmlessly unleashed. Still others, like Spanish Johnny and Professor Wunsch of *The Song of the Lark*, fill the gap between passion and walls with drink. Sadistic characters such as Frank Shabata and *Song of the Lark*'s Madison Bowers vent their disappointment by trying to make other

268. Rosowski, *Voyage Perilous*, p. x.

people as unhappy as they are. Mrs. Kronborg, meanwhile, is a cheerful “fatalist” who does has given up on trying to “direct things beyond her control,” which leaves her “a good deal of time to enjoy the ways of man and nature” as a kind of spectacle. Similarly, Godfrey St. Peter, after an adulthood dominated by “the verb ‘to love,’” returns to a “primitive” state of “sad pleasure” in which he accepts that, rather than being destined to harness or transcend material circumstances, “he was earth, and would return to earth.”²⁶⁹ Although, in some of these cases, it is tempting to explain these various compromises in terms of Montessoriesque “regressions,” kinks in the developmental process that might have been avoided, Cather does not encourage such readings. The narrator of *O Pioneers!*, for instance, tells us, about Frank Shabata, that his “grudge was fundamental,” self-generating. Thinking of how passion brings happiness to some and sadness to others, Emil muses on how, “from two ears that had grown up side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future, and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted; and nobody knew why.”²⁷⁰ The comparison of the growing personality to an experimental plant is right out of Montessori; but Emil, to all outward appearances the most successful experiment on the Divide, is destined, in a way that Montessori would not have understood, to rot.

The Secrets Told Only to Adolescence

The darkness and excessiveness of Cather's Desire leads her to imagine a difference sequence of life stages than does Montessori. Montessori sees a progression from the physical embryo through the stages of psychological and social embryo, each stage more expressive of *horme* than the last,

269. Cather, *Professor's House*, pp. 239-240.

270. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, p. 88.

culminating in the fully normalized personality capable of creativity. For Cather, on the other hand, life is less progressive and more cyclical. Also, in contrast to Montessori's *horme*, which is experienced as an unconscious drive toward normalization and perfection and manifested as a harmonious organization of movement and perception, Cather's Desire is experienced as a disjunction with material reality, and is often manifested as some kind of grotesquery. Cather represents this disjunction as something fundamental, never to be avoided. Cather's very young children, however, seem to possess something like Montessori's "absorbent mind," in which subject and object, mind and world, are not sufficiently differentiated for there to be any sense of a gulf between them. Rather than feeling trapped by Rosowski's "alien or meaningless material world," they are busy constructing their identities out of their environment. For the young Godfrey St. Peter, for instance, "Lake Michigan, the inland sea of his childhood [...] ran through the days like the weather, not a thing thought about, but a part of consciousness itself." Later in life, the open water remains a potent emblem for St. Peter, signifying, in his private mental alphabet, "the always possible escape" from the ever-encroaching "dullness" of a world that seems, with the betrayal of Tom Outland's legacy, to have lost its soul.²⁷¹ Or, consider the young Jim Burden, who feels "dissolved into" the "sheltered draw-bottom" where his grandmother makes her garden, which helps him move beyond his grief for his dead parents and becomes an emblem of a "new feeling of lightness and content." As the nameless editor-figure of *My Ántonia* puts it, such deeply absorbed childhood images constitute a "kind of freemasonry," in which "the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests" comes to mean something too much a part of one's own mental warp and woof to be communicated in logical form. The editor and Jim agree that "no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it."²⁷²

This childhood oneness of mind and world shatters at the onset of "youth" or "adolescence," a

271. Cather, *Professor's House*, p. 20.

272. Cather, *My Ántonia*, p. 3.

period in which sexuality and the creative imagination make their first appearance. “Adolescence grafted a new creature into the original one,” St. Peter muses, and “the complexion of a man's life was largely determined by how well or ill his original self and his nature as modified by sex rubbed on together. [...] The man he was now, the personality his friends knew, had begun to grow strong during adolescence, during the years when he was always consciously or unconsciously conjugating the verb 'to love.’” This new self, “the lover,” drives St. Peter not just to sexual conquest, but to accept a panoply of “penalties and responsibilities” that stand between him and the original, “primitive” self who was at home “wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed.” “Because there was Lillian,” his reverie continues, “there must be marriage and a salary. Because there was marriage, there were children. Because there were children, and fervour in the blood and brain, books were born as well as daughters. His histories, he was convinced, had no more to do with his original ego than his daughters had; they were a result of the high pressure of young manhood.”²⁷³

For Thea Kronborg, too, sexual and creative awakening go hand in hand, and together displace a childhood self that was at one with nature. On her thirteenth birthday, Professor Wunsch, who has previously stuck to technical matters, recites a short Heinrich Heine poem, “*Im leuchtenden summerkornen*,” which he asks her to interpret. The poem's speaker wanders in a garden, where the flowers ask him to “be not harsh to our sister/ Thou sorrowful, death-pale man.” Thea correctly reconstructs the poem's implied plot, in which the speaker stays up all night thinking about his sweetheart, sees the flowers, and realizes that, like them, his beloved is a delicate soul whom he should not domineer. For Wunsch, her reading indicates that she has “*der Geist, die Phantasie*” [“the spirit, the imagination”], the esoteric intuition of what makes “the rose to red, the sky to blue,” “*ohne dieses giebt es keine Kunst*” [“without which there is no art”]. Thea's sympathetic understanding of Heine's lover, however, suggests that she is undergoing an erotic as well as an artistic awakening. After leaving her

273. Cather, *Professor's House*, pp. 239-242.

lesson with Wunsch, she wanders in the desert outside of town, where she is fascinated by the sexually suggestive “yellow prickly-pear blossoms with their thousand stamens.” As she contemplates the blossoms, she senses that her childhood oneness with nature is slipping away, being replaced by something else. “She looked at the sand hills until she wished she *were* a sand hill. And yet she knew that she was going to leave them all behind some day. They would be changing all day long, yellow and purple and lavender, and she would not be there.”²⁷⁴ No longer taking nature into her “consciousness itself” like the young St. Peter, she now only wishes that she could. This day of leave-taking from the absorbent mind of her early years is also the moment when her real artistic consciousness makes its first appearance.

A short time later, Thea's avuncular but world-weary cheerleader Dr. Archie tells her that he is feeling old, to which she replies, “You've got to stay young for me. I'm getting young now, too.” When Archie asks her how one can “get” young – doesn't one start young and get older? – Thea explains that “People aren't young when they're children. Look at Thor, now; he's just a little old man. But Gus has a sweetheart, and he's young!”²⁷⁵ Thea's remark implies that there are three life stages, a scheme to which Cather seems to adhere throughout her fiction. First there is childhood, a time of passivity and communion with nature. Then there is youth, when Desire awakens. Following youth is age, which Thea implies arrives after Desire has faded again, as a kind of second childhood, which is also how St. Peter experiences it. While the transition between childhood and youth seems to be triggered by the onset of puberty, however, the transition between youth and age seems to be unmoored from biology. Thea believes that Archie, at least, has a choice about whether to “stay young” or not.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the transition from youth to age is St. Peter's transformation in the final book of *The Professor's House*. By the end of the previous book, the embedded diary

274. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 72.

275. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

containing “Tom Outland's Story,” St. Peter has seen the frustration of three interrelated arcs of Desire: his own, Tom Outland's, and that of the cliff-dwellers of the Blue Mesa. The cliff-dwellers, as we have seen, “r[i]se gradually from the condition of savagery” by creating a protected environment, a system of channels through which a cosmic force lifts them (literally and figuratively) above their warlike neighbors. Their civilization grows, not out of any triumph of higher faculties over lower (as a mental disciplinarian might imagine), nor out of any questing after comprehensive knowledge (as a Herbartian might), but as the natural consequence of peace, security, and access to (again, literal and figurative) deep springs. “Like all pueblo Indians, these people had had their farms away from their dwellings,” Outland writes in the diary. “For a stronghold they needed rock, and for farming, soft earth and a water main.”²⁷⁶ In all this, the cliff-dwellers' history filters Rosowski's narrative of the Romantic imagination's struggle to rise above the “alien or meaningless material world” through what I have been arguing are distinctly Montessori ideas about progress.

Cather, however, is notoriously a disbeliever in progress. The cliff-dwellers, rather than spreading enlightenment to the wider world, founder on two obstacles: forbidden passion (what I have been calling “disgusting vitality”) and insatiable appetite (what I have been calling dreams of “impossible things”). In the Cliff City, Outland and his companions find the unburied, mummified body of a young woman with a wound in her side, whom they call Mother Eve. Father Duchene speculates that she was murdered by a jealous husband, for “in primitive society the husband is allowed to punish an unfaithful wife with death.”²⁷⁷ Although the mystery of Mother Eve is never solved, her presence suggests that no utopia is free from sexual transgression. Desire has too much of a mind of its own; within Cliff City's perfect shelter, a corrosive element springs up from within. The cliff-dwellers' civilization came to an end, Outland surmises, when they were slaughtered on one of their infrequent trips to the fertile plains.

276. Cather, *Professor's House*, p. 201.

277. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

The central feature in Cliff City is an astronomical observation tower (which seems, as an effort to commune with cosmic forces, to extend the stargazing topos of *O Pioneers!*); while advancing in the “arts of peace,” it seems, the cliff-dwellers forgot about war, and perhaps more generally the reality principle that governs a violent world where shelter and resources can never be taken altogether for granted.

The story of the cliff-dwellers' rise and fall becomes the subject of Tom Outland's own dream of impossible things, as Outland, in turn, will be the subject of St. Peter's. Outland feels “reverence” for the Blue Mesa, where “humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality,” and mourns the fact that the cliff-dwellers' project of “purifying life” in “this stronghold where they were at once so safe and so comfortable” proved “too far advanced for their time and environment.” Where the stronghold of the mesa failed, however, he hopes that a different kind of stronghold, the product of a more advanced time and environment, will succeed: the Smithsonian Institution, which will “revive this civilization” by “interpret[ing]” its artifacts. Perhaps, it seems before his fateful trip to Washington, D.C., the world is finally ready to pick up where the cliff-dwellers left off. In the capital, however, he finds not the commitment to spiritual progress of the cliff-dwellers, but the rapacity of their destroyers. The Smithsonian higher-ups “don't care much about dead and gone Indians,” a helpful secretary tells him. “What they do care about is going to Paris, and getting another ribbon on their coats.” Failing to interest the Director of the Smithsonian, Outland returns to the mesa, only to find that his friend Roddy Blake has sold the artifacts to a German archaeologist, who will presumably make them accessible to scientific specialists, but not the general public. For Outland, Blake has taken expressions of a universal indwelling human spirit (evidenced, as discussed above, by the fact that some of the cliff-dwellers' pottery is identical to Cretan pottery) and signed them over to the highest bidder. “I never thought of selling” the artifacts, he tells Blake, “because they weren't mine

to sell – nor yours! They belonged to [...] all the people. [...] They were something that had been preserved through the ages by a miracle, and handed on to you and me, two poor cow-punchers, rough and ignorant, but I thought we were men enough to keep a trust.”²⁷⁸

Outland thinks, at first, that the mesa's significance is the treasure it contains. Once he sees that his own attempts to preserve that treasure are as doomed as the cliff-dwellers themselves were, he thinks differently. He realizes that the destruction of the cliff-dwellers and the loss of their artifacts was not accidental, but necessary, in a cosmos governed by dark passions such as greed. This revelation makes the loss of the artifacts a tragic inevitability rather than a preventable accident. With this knowledge, Outland sees that the arts of peace cannot be bequeathed as either institutions or artifacts, but only as ideals. “Every morning, when the sun's rays first hit the mesa top, while the rest of the world was in shadow,” he writes, “I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything.” His vision has been “co-ordinate[d] and simplif[ied],” and the mesa becomes “no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion,” no longer a prospect of human progress, but an illustration of the fallen human condition. Now he can study his Latin poets “methodically” and “intelligently,” with a proper sense of perspective.²⁷⁹

This new academic sure-footedness leads, eventually, to the scientific discovery that makes Outland's fortune. His “bulkheaded vacuum,” a device that helps airplanes fly by creating an sealed-off space within the vessel, can be read as a legacy of the walled-in, sky-gazing cliff-dwellers, a spiritual product that survives despite the loss of their material artifacts. If the vacuum helps humankind soar to higher realms of insight, then perhaps the cliff-dwellers can still be the source of an upward march of progress, albeit a discontinuous one. As it turns out, however, the vacuum is immediately installed in RAF planes, becoming a weapon of war. Outland himself dies in the war, and the profits from the

278. Ibid., pp. 219-20, 234, 242.

279. Ibid. p. 250.

vacuum finance the elaborate house of Rosamund and Louis Marsellus, which they christen “Outland.” Outland the house inverts the values that Outland the man learns on the Blue Mesa. Where the cliff-dwellers’ arts expressed a universal, indwelling human spirit, the Marselluses (particularly Rosamund) are preoccupied with fleeting trends and status symbols. Where the mesa is a secure, even secret place for the human spirit to unfold, the house is an ostentatious tourist trap, where Tom Outland’s effects will be displayed for visitors. The spirit of Outland’s project of uplift, and with it the similar project of the cliff-dwellers, is lost. “*He heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall scatter them!*,” St. Peter muses bitterly.²⁸⁰

St. Peter is a kind of spiritual heir to Outland, who is inspired by his student, even in his failure, in much the same way that Outland is inspired by the cliff-dwellers. His near-suffocation in his hermetically sealed study at the top of his house marks the definite conclusion of the story that begins with the Blue Mesa, which has been one of retreat into ever smaller and more rarefied “strongholds,” in increasingly modest attempts to stave off a world governed by senseless conflict. First there is the thriving cliff-dweller society itself, barricaded within the mesa, which is eventually overwhelmed by “brutal invaders.”²⁸¹ Then there are the cliff-dweller artifacts, which Outland attempts to house in the Smithsonian; these are lost because the Director of the Smithsonian is preoccupied with clawing his way to the top of the Washington social scene. With the artifacts lost, the plundered mesa becomes a spiritual *patria* for Outland, from which he draws the creative energy to create the Outland vacuum; the vacuum, initially the symbol of the cliff-dwellers’ ideals, is used in a war that kills its inventor, and appropriated by Rosamund and Marsellus in their own quest for financial and social dominance.

The last legitimate legatee of Outland, and hence of the cliff-dwellers, is St. Peter himself. Like the cliff-dwellers before their destruction, St. Peter’s life has been one of continuous exfoliation of a native

280. Ibid., p. 258.

281. Ibid., p. 219.

Desire, awakened in adolescence, which takes (as we saw above) intellectual and aesthetic as well as sexual forms. His marriage, parenthood, and scholarly work all thrive, however, only within spheres of protection whose tenuousness becomes more apparent throughout the novel. Toward the end of *The Professor's House*, St. Peter realizes that “all the most important things in his life [...] had been determined by chance.” The various consummations of Desire that he has enjoyed have come, not from any foolproof plan, but from contingent reprieves from the dreariness of conflict and competition. Of his marriage, for instance, he muses:

His married life had been happy largely through a circumstance with which neither he nor his wife had anything to do. They had been young people with good qualities, and very much in love, but they could not have been happy if Lillian had not inherited a small income from her father--only about sixteen hundred a year, but it had made all the difference in the world. A few memorable interregnums between servants had let him know that Lillian couldn't pinch and be shabby and do housework, as the wives of some of his colleagues did. Under such conditions she became another person, and a bitter one.

St. Peter experiences this realization as a “falling out of love” with his wife, and by extension with “all domestic and social relations.” He even falls out of love with the books he has authored, despite the fact that they might seem to belong to a world of scholarship that will outlast the squabbles of the day. In fact (as we saw briefly in the introduction to this chapter), *The Professor's House* shows the university, like the Smithsonian, falling prey to what Fisher calls a “cult for efficiency” that threatens the slow revelation of human potential represented by St. Peter's lifelong labor, a nine-volume history of North America's Spanish explorers. The campus is threatened by “the new commercialism, the aim to 'show results' that was undermining and vulgarizing education”; courses in “book-keeping, experimental farming, domestic science, dress-making, and what not” proliferate, and the ideal of learning as unhurried, self-directed meditation as practiced by St. Peter and his physicist colleague Robert Crane is sidelined in order to “give the taxpayers what they wanted.” While Crane's star falls, that of Horace Langtry rises. Langtry is a history professor whose “uncle was president of the board of regents, and very influential in State politics,” and thus helpful in getting the school's “financial

appropriations passed by the Legislature.” His “lax methods” allow students to get history credit for reading literary works, rather than rigorous history like St. Peter’s.²⁸² He even tries to get St. Peter fired for devoting too much time to his scholarship and not enough to his crowd-pleasing lectures. If the academic future belongs to the Langtrys of the world, St. Peter has reason to fear that even his books will fall into the same obscurity as the cliff-dwellers, their pottery, and the dreams of the young man they inspired. The transitoriness, even self-destructiveness, of the Cliff Dweller civilization, of Outland’s vacuum, of St. Peter’s study, and of all the novels’ other strongholds of quiet growth marks, once again, the second degree in Cather’s “*Bildung* to the second degree.”

Although Langtry has menaced St. Peter for twenty years, St. Peter does not despair of his legacy until he meditates on Outland’s disappointments, because he has been nourished by successive infusions of “youth.” First there is his own youth. In the “golden days” shortly after his wedding, with his grand historical design all before him, he does not “car[e] a whoop” about how his work will be received. “When the whole plan of his narrative was coming clearer and clearer all the time, when he could feel his hand growing easier with his material, when all the foolish conventions about that kind of writing were falling away and his relation with his work was becoming every day more simple, natural, and happy--he cared as little as the Spanish Adventurers themselves what Professor So-and-So thought about them.” After the initial excitement begins to wear off, his spirits are bolstered by “a few young men, scattered about the United States and England,” who are “intensely interested in his experiment.” And then there is Outland. Outland, St. Peter reflects, “had never handled things that were not the symbol of ideas.” Dying with his hopes still high for the Outland vacuum, before “his fellow scientists, his wife, the town and State” compel him to put down his scientific instruments and “write thousands of useless letters, frame thousands of false excuses,” Outland is spared the truth that reality can never be a reliable vessel for Desire. He can still believe, with Montessori, that violence persists because the

282. Ibid., pp. 257, 275, 138, 55

human spirit has been stunted, its channels of development blocked, and not because that spirit is inherently destructive and insatiable. It is this condition, of Desire without disillusion, Desire still, temporarily, at home in the world, that defines Cather's "youth" or "adolescence." "The morning brightness of the world," St. Peter calls it, and when his own wears off, "along came Outland and brought him a kind of second youth." The supplement of Outland's youth is necessary for St. Peter's project on several levels. His subject matter itself, the discovery of a new land in which Europeans might create a new civilization that would not suffer from the corruptions of the old, represents Catherian youth playing out on a historical rather than personal scale; to really grasp the significance of the Spanish Adventurers requires a youthful outlook. Thanks to Outland, St. Peter, like the Adventurers themselves, is "able to experience afresh things that had grown dull with use," to "see old perspectives transformed by new effects of light." For the early explorers, the canyons and mesas of the American West would have seemed like an environment in which a brighter future might develop; St. Peter, who "had not spent his youth in the great dazzling South-west country which was the scene of his explorers' adventures," can only see the desert as they saw it because Outland "had in his pocket the secrets which old trails and stones and water-courses tell only to adolescence."²⁸³ To childhood and to age, stones are simply stones.

The action of *The Professor's House* begins on the day that St. Peter learns about Marsellus's plans for Outland, and ends on the day that he learns that Rosamund is coming home from France, bearing Marsellus's child (rather than Outland's). Like the barbarians who overran the cliff-dwellers, St. Peter's family, with their "violent loves and hates," will disrupt the secure solitude in which he has been studying the unfolding of human Desire. Yet while the cliff-dwellers knew only steady gains the arts of peace, cut short by a sudden massacre, St. Peter has enough perspective to see that what goes up must come down, that in "making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by

283. Ibid., pp. 33-34, 258-61.

religious ceremonies and observances,” they were merely staving off, rather than transcending, the human destiny of violence, perversity, and disappointment. This realization makes him lose interest in “the verb ‘to love’” and all its works, and draws him back to childhood, which, for Cather, is a condition of passivity, in which Desire does not stir. “He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom’s old cliff-dwellers must have been,” St. Peter thinks about himself, “and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. [...] He was earth, and would return to earth.”²⁸⁴

Although in the end he cannot avoid the “Truth under all truths,” the truth that Desire is doomed to frustration, St. Peter postpones that painful reckoning until well into middle age. In his case, the long delay is due to a combination of the sheer magnitude of initial youthful exuberance (“the superabundance of heat which is always present where there is rich germination,” he calls it) enjoyed by himself and those who encourage him, such as Outland, the cliff-dwellers, and the Spanish Adventurers; the virtuosity with which each of these actors create effective channels for this energy, such as St. Peter’s historical work, Outland’s vacuum, and the Cliff City; and happy accidents, such as Lillian’s inheritance. While these forces persist, St. Peter’s personality does not need to incorporate the coping strategies that characterize the typical Cather character (Ivar’s asceticism, Frank Shabata’s sadism, Wunsch’s alcoholism). When he finally does encounter the “Truth,” he is, perhaps, too old to learn new tricks.²⁸⁵

Progress and Nostalgia

284. Ibid., pp. 275, 219, 264-65.

285. Ibid., p. 258.

For other Cather characters, however, the artificial prolongation of youth is itself a coping strategy. *The Song of the Lark's* Howard Archie, for instance, maintains an “unspent and miraculously preserved youthfulness,” despite his disastrous marriage to a pathological miser. Like Tom Outland, who “idealized the people he loved and paid his devoir to the ideal rather than to the individual, so that his behaviour was sometimes a little too exalted for the circumstances,” Archie simply ignores all that is bad and hopeless. He refuses, for example, to speak ill of his wife, whose unmotivated stinginess betrays one of those “little, mean natures” which “are among the darkest and most baffling of created things.” When Thea tells Fred Ottenburg about Archie, Fred's impression is that Archie is a shrunken man, floating ineffectually through life on some combination of “callow innocence and aged indifference.” Thea, however, sees a certain heroism in Archie's deliberate optimism. “He's very good,” she assures Fred; rather than naively whistling past the graveyard, he has consciously decided that “he won't admit things.”²⁸⁶

Archie seems to believe that, while the hopefulness of youth might tend to fade, it is possible, perhaps even obligatory, to keep it alive by sheer force of will. He views art, for instance, as a kind of fountain of youth, nourishing those, like himself, who are trying to stave off disillusionment. Of Thea's singing, he says that “one felt in her such a wealth of *Jugendzeit* [youthfulness], all those flowers of the mind and the blood that bloom and perish by the myriad in the few exhaustless years when the imagination first kindles. It was in watching her [...] that one got, for a moment, so much that one had lost.” Similarly, Archie expects politics to periodically rejuvenate society. After he strikes it rich as a mining speculator, he donates to a political “reform gang” whose main attraction is its “young fellows” with “red-hot convictions” about how to free Colorado from such vices as liquor and prostitution. The young fellows' efforts go nowhere, however. Unlike in some large cities, the saloons and brothels are not supported by entrenched political machines. As Fred Ottenburg remarks, “You've got nothing to

286. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, pp. 309, 33.

reform out here. The situation has always been as simple as two and two in Colorado.”²⁸⁷ Rather, purveyors of vice seem to thrive simply because they meet a perennial human need. But that is one of the things that Archie won't admit.

Archie's kind of politics is merely a distraction from the real problem of Desire. Throughout Cather's fiction, “progressives” are people who believe that one passion might eventually thrive inside four walls, if only the walls were somehow reformed; they are all, in her own sense, young. Consider the striking episode of Mrs. Tellemantez's seashell. Mrs. Tellemantez is the wife of Spanish Johnny, a friend of Thea's who is occasionally seized by a “madness” that makes him hop a freight train for a few weeks of busking and heavy drinking. Archie, who helps Mrs. Tellemantez nurse Johnny back to health, confesses one day that he does not understand why Johnny “behave[s] so.” In response, Mrs. Tellemantez's asks Archie to hold a conch shell up to his ear. “You hear something in there?,” she asks. “You hear the sea; and yet the sea is very far from here. You have judgment, and you know that. But he is fooled. To him, it is the sea itself. A little thing is big to him.” Johnny, that is, goes mad because he thinks that a little thing, life, is actually a big thing, Desire. (Recall Wunsch: “The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing – desire.”) Mrs. Tellemantez thinks that Archie has judgment because he would never make that particular mistake, but she also knows that he will never get a clear idea of Johnny's motivation. “You do not understand in this country,” she tells him; “you are progressive.” The incommensurability of big Desire and the little world, that is, is either lost on him or, more likely, the one big thing that he will not admit.²⁸⁸

Like Archie, *My Ántonia's* Jim Burden clings to vitality in the face of disappointment. Having lost his parents at a young age, Jim projects compensatory myths of renewal onto the silent landscape, and onto people whose linguistic, ethnic, or class background prevents them from speaking for themselves.

287. Ibid., pp. 314, 333.

288. Ibid., pp. 42-43.

“His” *Ántonia* is a nurturing earth goddess, though *Ántonia* herself aspires to refinement. His Nebraska is a clean slate, “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made,” on which the legacy of Native Americans is reduced to a phantasm, “like strokes of Chinese white on canvas.” As an adult, he spends his time communing with the pristine wilderness ... in order to develop it and move on. Jim's tendency to read mythic renewal into everyday life is all at once a necessary imposition of human meaning onto raw nature, a mechanism for coping with his early grief, a harmful erasure of countervailing perspectives, and an unsustainable addiction to novelty.²⁸⁹

Jim is a man who “never seems [...] to grow older,” someone trapped in his own childhood, able to find meaning or happiness only in connection with his early memories. In the words of the frame-story narrator, “more than any other person we remembered, [*Ántonia*] seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood.” Jim's memoir consists of a protracted account of that early adventure, followed by a series of events that gradually distances him from it, even as he becomes more pathologically dependent on it as a fund of meaning. His childhood memories are “a kind of freemasonry,” a secret language that is, for him, the only one worth speaking.²⁹⁰

When Jim's memoir begins, he is entering a strange country for the first time, reading about Jesse James and fantasizing about desperadoes. Nebraska, which he wonderfully describes as “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made,” is a place in which “the world seems left behind,” and they have stepped “outside man's jurisdiction.” Legal, territorial, and physical boundaries melt away, as do the boundaries of the self. When Jim gets his first good look at Nebraska by daylight, he lies in his grandmother's garden and imagines that the distinction between himself and the earth has evaporated. “I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins,” he recalls, “and I

289. Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 10, 52.

290. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

did not want to be anything more. [...] That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.” As we have seen, this is the language of Cather's “childhood,” a time before subject and object, desirer and desired, have solidified as distinct entities. It is also, for Jim, a language of consolation, a way of imaginatively uniting himself with his late parents. “Perhaps we feel like that when we die,” he muses, “and become a part of something entire.” He copes with loss and frustration by preserving this intuition of cosmic significance, like a guttering candle, living off its increasingly pale light.²⁹¹

Things and people become important to Jim not exactly on their own account, but because, by virtue of the “freemasonry” of early association, they come to embody his own sense of boundless possibility. This is why it is so fitting for him to change the title of his memoir from “*Ántonia*” to “*My Ántonia*”: as the narrator puts it, “how he knew her and how he felt her was exactly” what was most interesting about her. When Jim tells *Ántonia* that “it's wonderful just how much people can mean to each other,” he seems to mean “how much people can signify for each other,” not “how much people can care about each other.” He is often callous about what experiences mean to the people who actually experience them, as distinct from their meaning as symbols in his private cosmology. For instance, when he hears the story of the wolves and the wedding party, a horrifying secret that has tormented Pavel for years, he imagines that “the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party had been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure.” When Jim's grandmother starts screaming after hearing of Mr. Shimerda's suicide, Jim recalls that he was excited because, as he says, “I looked forward to any new crises with delight [...] Perhaps the barn had burned; perhaps the cattle had frozen to death; perhaps a neighbor was lost in a storm.” Several times, too, Jim misreads *Ántonia* by typecasting her as a fountain of vital energy, a rambunctious Eve who asks him to give (English) names to all the beasts, trees, even colors, as if his mind and creation really were one. In fact, *Ántonia*'s concerns are consistently more practical and immediate than Jim's. After *Ántonia* starts

291. Ibid., pp. 10, 20.

working the land, she spends a day relaxing at Jim's house, and he tells her that she seems more “like herself” there than she does in the fields. Her response is that she is a different person when she is with Jim, where life is easy, and when she is working, when life is hard. Jim, however, cannot admit either her independent existence or the necessity of unedifying work. He has put his psychological eggs in a human basket, and he cannot let her break them by becoming something that is incompatible with the symbol he needs her to be.²⁹²

Jim claims, in the last book of the novel, to always have loved *Ántonia*, but he admits this to himself only once she's romantically unavailable. Because of his spectatorial relationship to other people, his erotic life revolves around unrealizable fantasies; to love a real person is too risky. When he first hears about *Ántonia*, he is distracted by fantasies about being an outlaw and starting the world over again, and declines to meet her. When Jim makes a picture book for Yulka, he chooses, for his frontispiece, a scene of Napoleon banishing his wife. When Wick Cutter assaults him, he is not so much outraged at Cutter as he is embarrassed at his own brush with sexuality; instead of turning Cutter in to avenge *Ántonia*'s honor, he makes his grandmother promise to keep the matter a secret. When he does take up with a woman, she is as careful to avoid commitment as he. Lena Lingard, an indiscriminately flirtatious farm girl who becomes a successful dress-maker, trades on the superficial trappings of love. “It ain't my prairie,” she blandly replies when her neighbors complain of the men who follow her around. At the Vannis' tent, she dances the same way in each dance, as if in a “waking dream” of “coming home to something, of inevitable, fated return.” Dancing with *Ántonia*, Jim recalls, “you set out every time upon a new adventure”; with Lena, one retreats into a pleasant fog. In Lincoln, she attracts conceited, insecure suitors (a dour violinist and an old man who has badly invested his family fortune) whom she never takes altogether seriously. Jim is, essentially, another of these suitors, albeit one that Lena finds pleasant enough to cultivate. This is the only kind of sexuality, such as it is,

292. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 77, 111.

that Jim will risk trying. If Archie marries badly but won't admit to it, Jim cannot marry (until much later) because he won't commit to it.²⁹³

Jim's taste in art reflects this same fear of interpersonal commitment. Consider the strange sexual language with which he describes the pianist blind d'Arnault. "To hear him, to watch him, was to see a negro enjoying himself as only a negro can," Jim recalls. "It was as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped up on those black and white keys, and he were gloating over them and trickling them through his yellow fingers." Grotesque, disabled, and racially marginalized, D'Arnault's entire world has been compressed, not into a single person or a single place, but into an all-sufficient activity. The piano is his only creative outlet: when he touches the instrument, it erupts into a "black universe" that is as pitch-dark as Jim's first Nebraska night, and d'Arnault instinctively "couples himself to it." Like Lena Lingard, d'Arnault represents a kind of passion without risk; unlike Lena, who always has to keep up appearances, d'Arnault has no incentive to be coy. From the pianist, Jim learns that in art, if not in life, it is safe to feel deeply.²⁹⁴

When his professor, Gaston Cleric, is summoned to Harvard, Jim must decide whether to continue his idle affair with Lena Lingard, a fellow Black Hawk "freemason," or continue his education and leave Nebraska behind. He chooses to leave; in doing so, however, he does not untether himself from his childhood. The most important element of Jim's college education is Virgil, the author of *My Antonia's* nostalgic epigraph, "optima dies, prima fugit": the best days are the first to flee. Virgil, Cleric explains, wanted to bring the Muse into his *patria*, meaning "not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood [...] where the poet was born [...] to his father's fields." Like Jim, that is, Cleric's Virgil finds the most meaning in his earliest associations. Why, then, one might ask, does he want to bring the Muse, a foreign import, to his patria? Why is his love of the patria not self-sufficient?

293. Ibid., pp. 133, 170.

294. Ibid., pp. 144-48.

What is gained by making it into a “great canvas, crowded with figures of gods and men”? For Jim, wider horizons can increase our appreciation of the things closest to our hearts; they can help us clarify what those things are and why we love them. Listening to Cleric discourse on the classics, Jim finds that “mental excitement was apt to send me with a rush back to my own naked land and the figures scattered upon it. While I was in the very act of yearning toward the new forms that Cleric brought up before me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal past. They stood out strengthened and simplified now, like the image of the plough against the sun. ... Whenever my consciousness was quickened, all those early friends were quickened within it.” What Jim from Virgil, in other words, is how to mentally rearrange the consoling images of childhood, so that they can be fitted into ever broader spheres of activity. Now Jake and Otto and Russian Peter are not just farmers but models by which to understand the ancients. As he becomes more adept at reframing his childhood experiences, he slips further into the realm of solipsism: as he puts it, when he reads poetry his old friends are “so much alive in me that I scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how.”²⁹⁵

Jim's increasing indifference to the real people and places behind his private vitalistic mythos culminates in a career selling the fantasy of total rejuvenation in an “unfinished country.” A lawyer for a Western railroad, the narcissistically “romantic [...] disposition” that “often made him seem very funny as a boy” is “one of the strongest elements in his success.” His job involves going “off into the wilds hunting for lost parks or exploring new canyons,” losing himself in virgin lands without griefs and entanglements, and then helping to exploit their natural resources. “Jim is still able to lose himself in those big Western dreams,” the frame-story narrator reports; but dreams, visions, and vistas seem to be all he is interested in. In the long run, of course, his work destroys what it feeds on. The better Jim does his job, the less unfinished country there will be. Although, like Virgil's Muse, they throw light on

295. Ibid., pp. 199, 203.

little-known places, railroads are antithetical to Jim's ideal of an inviolable *patria*, since they represent both the disruptive violence of capitalism and exposure to the insistent desires of other people. As Jim's grandfather understands, the cornfields will “enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerda's cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields.”²⁹⁶

If Jim works for the forces of technological progress, his wife represents (Cather's vicious parody of) social progress. She lends her support to suffragists, avant-garde bohemians, and striking garment-makers, but, like Jim, her restlessness arises from a loss to which she refuses to admit. “Brutally jilted” by a cousin, she tries, “out of bravado,” to prove that she never needed him. She marries Jim simply to shock people with her “unknown man from the West,” and flouts the values she was raised with just to “astonish her friends.” Consider how Jim describes Mrs. Cutter, a self-righteous woman of a type he says he has seen “all over the world: sometimes founding new religions, sometimes being forcibly fed.” The force-feeding almost certainly alludes to the suffragist Alice Paul. In 1917, one year before *My Ántonia*'s publication, Paul was imprisoned for picketing in front of the White House. She protested with a twenty-two-day hunger strike which generated enormous publicity. For the last week of her hunger strike, Paul was force-fed raw eggs through a feeding tube, and that ordeal became a powerful symbol for the American suffrage movement. The insinuation that Alice Paul's motives were anything like Mrs. Cutter's conveys not just sharp disagreement but downright contempt. If progress is a quixotic waste of time in *The Song of the Lark* and a tragic impossibility in *The Professor's House*, in *My Ántonia* it is the last resort of a scoundrel. For Montessori, an inner adjustment to *horme* must be prefatory to progressive politics, but for Cather the inner struggle with Desire becomes an alternative to politics writ large. Reformers aiming to alter the conditions of life overlook life's general inadequacy; for many of them, reform politics reflects a failure to come to terms with this inadequacy, which can be either chamingly quixotic, as in Dr. Archie's case, noxiously narcissistic, as in Mrs. Cutter's, or some

296. Ibid., pp. 5, 108.

blend of the two, as in Jim Burden's.²⁹⁷

What Was Art but a Way to Make Oneself into a Vessel?

Cather “associate[s] Greek and Latin literature with suffocation, decay, and death,” as Sharon O'Brien observes of the stories collected in *The Troll Garden*. In one story, a classical scholar stocks his study with mummies; in another, a teacher stumbles during a recitation of Thomas Macaulay's poem of ancient Rome, “Horatius at the Bridge,” because he cannot remember the words “bold Horatius,” as if he has lost the very concept of boldness.²⁹⁸ For Cather's nostalgics, the past is a still pool of significant experiences, which they are afraid to disturb, and which eventually grows stagnant. She understands classicism, for instance, as a kind of aesthetic nostalgia in which a fixation on the meaning of the past prevents real engagement with the present. In *My Ántonia*, stagnant water is implicated in the deaths of two nostalgic characters, Gaston Cleric and the suicidal tramp. Though the proximate cause of Gaston Cleric's death is pneumonia, his health has already been weakened by a fever he contracts on a solo visit to “the sea temples at Paestum,” surrounded by “marsh grasses.” The tramp appears one day at the Norwegian farms where Ántonia works, complaining that his country has lost its connection to the past. When he learns that the farmers are Norwegians, he responds, “My God! [...] so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy.”²⁹⁹ After the tramp takes his own life by jumping into a threshing machine, the Norwegians find a copy of a poem called “The Old Oaken Bucket” in his pocket. In the poem, written in 1817 by Samuel Woolworth, a well represents the inner reservoirs of significance that attach to “scenes of [...] childhood.” The first and last of the poem's three stanzas read:

297. Ibid., pp. 5, 164.

298. O'Brien, *Emerging Voice*, p. 268.

299. Cather, *My Ántonia*, pp. 197, 139.

How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood,
 When fond recollection presents them to view!
 The orchard, the meadow, the deep-tangled wild-wood,
 And every loved spot which my infancy knew!
 The wide-spreading pond, and the mill that stood by it,
 The bridge, and the rock where the cataract fell,
 The cot of my father, the dairy-house nigh it,
 And e'en the rude bucket that hung in the well-
 The old oaken bucket, the iron-bound bucket,
 The moss-covered bucket which hung in the well.

[...]

How sweet from the green mossy brim to receive it,
 As poised on the curb it inclined to my lips!
 Not a full blushing goblet could tempt me to leave it,
 The brightest that beauty or revelry sips.
 And now, far removed from the loved habitation,
 The tear of regret will intrusively swell,
 As fancy reverts to my father's plantation,
 And sighs for the bucket that hangs in the well
 The old oaken bucket, the iron-bound bucket,
 The moss-covered bucket that hangs in the well!³⁰⁰

If stagnant water represents emotional and aesthetic failure in *My Ántonia*, in *The Song of the Lark* life and art are described in terms of the water's eternal flowing and circulation. Whereas Jim, Cleric, and the tramp sip life from closely guarded pools, each indifferent to anything beyond the bounds of his idiosyncratic *patria*, Thea Kronborg comes to see herself as a container into which others can “debouch” themselves, and art is figured as the “open, eager, unprotected” interchange of experience.³⁰¹ Indeed, while the connection of aesthetics to water imagery is rather oblique in *My Ántonia*, water is essential to the depiction of art in *The Song of the Lark*. Bathing in a desert stream, Thea wonders:

[W]hat was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself, -- life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals.³⁰²

As we have seen, both Cather and Montessori use water images to describe the movement of a cosmic

300. Woodworth, Samuel. “The Old Oaken Bucket.” *The Poetical Works of Samuel Woodworth*, Vol. I. New York: Scribner, 1861, pp. 31-32.

301. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 200.

302. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

energy (Desire or *horme*, respectively), and images of irrigation to describe the channeling of that energy for human purposes. Recall Montessori:

A true preparation [for the artistic life] digs the beds where the waters which well up from [the mind] will flow in smiling or majestic rivers, without overflowing and so destroying the beauty of internal order. In the matter of causing the springing up of these rushing waters of internal creation we are powerless. 'Never to obstruct the spontaneous outburst of an activity, even though it springs forth like the humble trickle of some almost invisible source,' and 'to wait' – this is our task.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher also uses the irrigation metaphor:

[The Montessori mother] is only taking advantage of her knowledge of the fact that water runs down-hill and not up, and that you may keep it level by great efforts on your part, and even force it to climb, but that you can only expect it to work for you when you let it follow the course marked out for it by the laws of physics. In other words, she sees that her business is to make use of every scrap of the children's interest, rather than to waste her time and theirs trying to force it into channels where it cannot run; to carry her waterwheel where the water falls over the cliff, and not to struggle to turn the river back towards the watershed.

[The Montessori directress] is but moving about from one little river of life to another, lifting a sluice gate here for a sluggish nature, constructing a dam there to help a too impetuous nature to concentrate its forces, and much of the time occupied in quietly observing, quite at her leisure, the direction of the channels being constructed by the different streams. The kindergarten teacher tries to do this, but she seems obsessed with the idea, unconscious for the most part, that it is, after all, her duty to manage somehow to increase the flow of the little rivers by pouring into them some of her own superabundant vital force. [...] She must be always helping them grow! Why else is she there?³⁰³

For both Cather and Montessori, the channeled energy that water represents permeates nature as well as the mind. Individuals and societies belong to a larger cosmic ecology (or, as we shall see, economy) driven by this omnipresent force. Thea places her stream within a human frame, musing that it “must have sovereign qualities, from having been the object of so much service and desire,” and that it represents “a continuity of life that reached back into the old time.”³⁰⁴ In *The Song of the Lark*, however, the human relationship with water seems to echo deeper natural rhythms. In one description of Moonstone, “the frail, brightly painted desert town was shaded by the light-reflecting, wind-loving trees of the desert, whose roots are always seeking water and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain.” “The long porous roots of the cottonwood are irrepressible,” we learn.

303. Fisher, *Montessori Mother*, pp. 181-82.

304. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 258.

“They break into the wells as rats do into granaries, and thief the water.”³⁰⁵ The harried cottonwood's struggle for water becomes a dark metaphor for human desperation when a diseased tramp takes his revenge on the townsfolk who spurned him by drowning himself in the Moonstone standpipe, causing a deadly fever. When the authorities investigate the fever's cause, their first idea is that “the town well was full of rotting cottonwood roots.” When Ray Kennedy takes her out into the desert, Thea's “sense of [...] boundless freedom” finds its correlative in a “mirage” of

a shallow silver lake that spread for many miles, a little misty in the sunlight. Here and there one saw reflected the image of a heifer, turned loose to live upon the sparse sand-grass. They were magnified to a preposterous height and looked like mammoths, prehistoric beasts standing solitary in the waters that for many thousands of years actually washed over that desert; – the mirage itself may be the ghost of that long-vanished sea.³⁰⁶

This exuberant image of the land itself as liquid recurs in the “wet fields” of the Breton painting that lends its title to the novel. Desire, the “shining, elusive element which is life itself,” and which Thea channels, is not just something fabricated by the mind; it is a property of the universe, a background behind everything.

When Thea speaks of herself as a water jug, she does not imagine holding Desire still (as we have seen, Cather abhors stagnation), but transporting it from one place to another. In the novel's epilogue, the residents of Moonstone hear that Thea has sung for the King of England, and take “real refreshment” from the news. The narrator compares their situation to that of “the many naked little sandbars which lie between Venice and the main-land, in the seemingly stagnant water of the lagoons,” which “are made habitable and wholesome only because, every night, a foot and a half of tide creeps in from the sea and winds its fresh brine up through all that network of shining water-ways.” This image of art as rising water restoring life to a parched land echoes one of Thea's remarks:

“Wagner says, in his most beautiful opera, that art is only a way of remembering youth. And the older we grow the more precious it seems to us, and the more richly we can present that memory. When we've

305. Ibid., p. 36.

306. Ibid., p. 45.

got it all out, – the last, the finest thrill of it, the brightest hope of it,” – she lifted her hand above her head and dropped it, – “then we stop. We do nothing but repeat after that. The stream has reached the level of its source. That’s our measure.”³⁰⁷

In many ways these passages seem to reflect Montessori's ideas about art. Beyond the general idea of art as the creation of a channel, they also involve a notion of uneven spiritual uplift, rising and then stopping, and perhaps, like the waters of the Venice lagoon, later falling. According to Montessori, wherever there was an “intensity of civil life” and “the intelligence had time to mature in peace,” one finds works of art scattered like “iridescent shell[s]”; but, clearly, these “multiform creation[s] of the inner man” are neither causes nor symptoms of uniform progress, or one would not find them in the ruins of lost civilizations. Montessori, however, sees the sporadic spiritual flights of art within the context of a generally upward trajectory for the human race, while Cather, as her tidal metaphor suggests, sees art's refreshment of life as a cyclical phenomenon that does not lead to a future much different from the present.

Furthermore, while Montessori's *horme* flows *into* life from some higher or deeper realm, Cather's Desire flows *through* life and ultimately leaves it behind. Whereas Montessori and her admirers speak of allowing the waters of unconscious impulse to reach the seed that is the child's growing mind, Thea's stream is forever “hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.” As we have seen, the essential difference between *horme* and Desire is that, in relation to Desire, people are destined to be discontented. Correspondingly, Cather's water, unlike Montessori's, is often unruly, elusive, or dangerous. Midway through *The Song of the Lark*, Thea decides to abandon the piano, because her early technical training was not good enough to make the instrument wholly her own. Her piano teacher encourages her to become a singer after hearing her rendition of *Tak for Ditt Rod* [Thanks for Your Advice], a Norwegian song whose lyrics are given in English translation as: “*But I prefer to steer my boat into the din of roaring breakers. Even if the journey is my last, I may find what I have*

307. Ibid., p. 389.

never found before. Onward must I go, for I yearn for the wild sea. I long to fight my way through the angry waves, and to see how far, and how long I can make them carry me.” Although one might see the dominant note here as triumphalism – “to fight my way through the angry waves” – Thea says that “it always makes me think about a story my grandmother used to tell” about a farm-hand who, discovering his wife's infidelity, took her in his arms and waltzed both of them over the side of a cliff.³⁰⁸ *Tak for Ditt Rod* announces Thea's willingness to embrace a force that is, like Montessori's *horme*, larger than herself, but unlike *horme*, also capable of violently overwhelming her.

Although she would have seen death as a physician, Montessori seems to have been uninterested in mortality as an element of the human condition; indeed, she seems to have made peace with the fact of death only by throwing herself into the care of those with the most living left to do, young children. As a medical student, according to her biographer, Montessori had a “distaste for viewing or handling flesh and organs,” and almost became sick when she encountered her first cadaver. After her first lesson in dissection, she considered leaving medicine, but resolved to stick with it after she had a “mystical revelation of purpose.” While walking in the park, she met a tattered beggar woman and her two-year-old child; the child was playing with a scrap of paper. Montessori told her first biographer that the child's happy absorption in its play, which blinded it to its depressing surroundings, gave her the courage to return to the dissection room (and, from there, to develop her new science of education).³⁰⁹ At the root of Montessori education, if we read into this episode a bit freely, is a determination to avert the gaze from death. At the root of Thea Kronborg's art, we find the opposite determination. As a child, Thea is obliged to attend prayer meetings at the church where her father is a pastor, where she meets elderly people and “sickly girls” who “were already preparing to die.” Initially, Thea finds these meetings depressing, a sharp contrast to the glittering world of art that she encounters in *Anna*

308. Ibid., pp. 231, 239.

309. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, p. 44.

Karenina. However, the narrator informs us, “Thea would have been astonished if she could have known how, years afterward, when she had need of them, those old faces were to come back to her, long after they were hidden away under the earth; that they would seem to her then as full of meaning, as mysteriously marked by Destiny, as the people who danced the mazurka under the elegant Korsunsky.”³¹⁰ Indeed, the “spiritual discipline” of the prayer meetings bears fruit in the part that makes her singing career. As one of her New York friends remarks, when she first performs Elizabeth in *Tannhauser*, her own mother is on her deathbed. “I could see her anxiety and grief getting more and more into the part,” the friend remarks. “The last act is heart-breaking. It’s as homely as a country prayer meeting: might be any lonely woman getting ready to die. It’s full of the thing every plain creature finds out for himself, but that never gets written down.”³¹¹ The acceptance of death, too, is the central subject of many of the art works alluded to in *The Song of the Lark*. In addition to those already mentioned, these include *Hamlet*, William Cullen Bryant’s “Thanatopsis,” Addison’s *Cato*, Gluck’s *Orfeo*, and the Gerome painting “The Pasha’s Grief,” which depicts its subject mourning his pet tiger.

For Montessori, as we have seen, art is a particular kind of “materialized abstraction,” a physical thing whose value reflects an economy of *horme*. *Horme*, flowing into the human body from an unseen, transcendent realm, is responsible for the formation of mental and sensory “nebulae” which are capable of furthering its developmental (or, more broadly, evolutionary) project. This project can only be realized via interaction with the physical environment, however, since the nebulae are “system[s] of relationship” to the outside world, not free-standing faculties. The physical objects that are thereby involved in the unfolding of *horme* are “emblems,” each one containing some essential component of humanity’s ineffable hormic heritage. Cather has a similar notion of how elements of the physical world come to have spiritual, and particularly aesthetic, significance, but hers incorporates the element of

310. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, pp. 112, 115.

311. *Ibid.*, p. 379.

frustration that we have been tracing throughout her work. For Cather, objects derive their meaning from an economy of Desire that involves both satisfaction and disappointment. As Cather's one passion flows through the four walls of everyday life, it inevitably finds parts of itself twisted, cramped, or suppressed. It is these elements of Desire, those which are too big for normal life, that create the most highly charged materialized abstractions in her fiction. Mrs. Tellemantez's seashell, for instance, symbolizes the inaccessibility of Desire, and makes it visible to those, like Archie, who are unaware of that problem. Even mundane objects such as dollars ultimately derive their spiritual value from the same source. For Thea, six hundred dollars, the amount she receives as the beneficiary of Ray Kennedy's life insurance policy, is "the price of a man's life. Ray Kennedy had worked hard and been sober and denied himself, and when he died he had six hundred dollars to show for it. I always measure things by that six hundred dollars, just as I measure high buildings by the Moonstone standpipe. There are standards we can't get away from."³¹² The only other mention of the standpipe is in connection with the tramp's suicide, so both of Thea's examples of materialized abstractions are closely linked to disappointment and death. Squarely facing these unpleasant facts, therefore, is a necessary part of the education of the artist. As Archie puts it, Thea seems to understand "what he had hoped to find in the world, and had not found"; she alone can communicate the full, unrealizable extent of "our original want," the essential "drama" of human life.

This original want is not a special possession of artists, but something that is "formed in us in early youth, undirected, and of its own accord." Only artists, however, know how to communicate about it. Thinking of Ray Kennedy, Wunsch, Archie, and Spanish Johnny, Thea muses that "each of them concealed another person in himself, just as she did. [...] How deep they lay, these second persons, and how little one knew about them, except to guard them fiercely. It was to music, more than to anything else, that these hidden things in people responded." Art's task, for Cather, is to help people develop, not

312. Ibid., p. 386.

Montessori's "normalized" personality that surfs on the waves of *horme* toward increasing personal and social perfection (the best one can hope for from this project, in Cather's world, is, like Tom Outland, to die before its impossibility becomes fully apparent), but a personality both open to Desire (unlike, say, Mrs. Archie or Madison Bowers) and accepting of its discontents. Where Montessori imagines the individual being woven into increasingly intricate and harmonious ecosystems, Cather hopes only to share the Navajo pines' "exalted power to bear."

Despite these differences from Montessori, Cather agrees that the ideal personality must unfold from within. The drama of Desire, the ordeal of the second self, is something "every plain creature finds out for himself, but that never gets written down." While art can help people commune with their own Desire, it cannot tell them anything that they do not, at some level, already know. Fred Ottenburg speaks of "a lot of girls [who] go to boarding-school together, come out the same season, dance at the same parties, are married off in groups, have their babies at about the same time, send their children to school together, and so the human crop renews itself." These women, like the women of whom Ray Kennedy complains that they "were always nodding and jerking[,] apologizing, deprecating, coaxing, insinuating with their heads," are too fixated on the limited slice of experience which can be communicated on the surface to ever become true "individuals." In contrast, Thea and her mother share "a large kind of look, that was not all the time being broken up and convulsed by trivial things."³¹³ As in Montessori's process of normalization, in Cather's aesthetic education the individual, isolated from the superficiality of socially defined ends, makes progress by interacting with materialized abstractions (Montessori's apparatus, Cather's art works) in mental solitude, for as long as necessary, with no imposed schedule or itinerary. Recall Montessori's student who "repeated [an] exercise forty-two times. Then she stopped as if coming out of a dream and smiled happily. Her eyes shone brightly and she looked about. [...] And now, for no apparent reason, her task was finished." The comparison to Thea's

313. Ibid., p. 108.

own mode of learning is striking:

Harsanyi noticed how much and how unhesitatingly she changed her delivery of the whole song, the first part as well as the last. He had often noticed that she could not think a thing out in passages. Until she saw it as a whole, she wandered like a blind man surrounded by torments. After she once had her "revelation," after she got the idea that to her -- not always to him -- explained everything, then she went forward rapidly. But she was not always easy to help. She was sometimes impervious to suggestion; she would stare at him as if she were deaf and ignore everything he told her to do. Then, all at once, something would happen in her brain and she would begin to do all that he had been for weeks telling her to do, without realizing that he had ever told her.³¹⁴

Compare, too, Montessori's "lesson of silence," in which children maintain complete silence in order to normalize and sharpen their sense of hearing, with Thea's rejuvenation at Panther Canyon:

She used to wonder at her own inactivity. She could lie there hour after hour in the sun and listen to the strident whir of the big locusts, and to the light, ironical laughter of the quaking aspens. All her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up. Now, she reflected, as she drew herself out long upon the rugs, it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her. She had got to a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort.³¹⁵

Thea's early training, under Wunsch, emphasizes technical proficiency, learning to physically manipulate the piano. "Scale of E minor," he demands. "*Weiter, weiter! . . . Immer* I hear the thumb, like a lame foot. *Weiter . . . weiter*, once; . . . *Schön!* The chords, quick!" Bracketing Wunsch's aggressive demeanor, these exercises bear a passing resemblance to Montessori's insistence on certain fixed, basic distinctions such as smooth/rough as the "alphabet" of all later accomplishment. Wunsch knows, however, that he cannot teach Thea anything about "*der Geist, die Phantasie*" itself. When it comes to the spirit of music, Thea can be helped only by being protected, by Harsanyi from the "stupid faces" of Chicago's commercial musical world, by Ottenburg, who whisks her away from the city to Panther Canyon, and even by Archie, who runs social interference for her while she prepares for performances in New York. While some might think that her brilliant operatic roles reflect a rigorous training in acting, Ottenburg sees that "the people who chatter about her being a great actress don't seem to get the notion" of how "she simplifies a character down to the musical idea it's built on, and

314. Ibid., p. 166.

315. Ibid., p. 254.

makes everything conform to that [...] Instead of inventing a lot of business and expedients to suggest character, she knows the thing at the root,” from her own communion with Desire.³¹⁶ Those who have closed their minds to this communion, such as Thea's teacher Madison Bowers, must resort to such “business and expedients.” Bowers, a man with “the soul of a shrimp,” sees art solely in terms of pleasing large crowds. Bowers's own singing career is thwarted by his inability to connect with his audiences, and he takes his revenge by helping untalented singers, whom he calls “fakirs,” hide their lack of talent from the public. He has “a whole bag of tricks for stupid people, 'life-preservers,' he called them.” When one of his students attempts a note too high for her natural range, for instance, Bowers has her “always put her right hand out into the air, as if she were indicating height, or giving an exact measurement.”³¹⁷ Bowers's pedagogy represents, in terms of aesthetic education, the same mistaken idea that Fisher, ventriloquizing Montessori, calls the “cult for efficiency.”

Conclusion

As we have seen, between 1890 and 1920, thinkers from across the political spectrum came to agree that a new kind of education was needed to prepare Americans for life in a nation whose ethnic diversity, technological development, and vocational specialization made it both more interconnected and more fragmented than its founders had anticipated. During the same period, education, formerly overseen by churches, town or city ward councils, or philanthropists, became a profession and asserted its right to oversee itself. Like other professionals, educators had to prove that they were objective and nonpartisan, that they could be trusted to act wholeheartedly in their clients' interests. Unlike other

316. Ibid., p. 357.

317. Ibid., pp. 216, 226.

professionals, however, educators' "clients" were their students, who entrusted them with the formation of their character and world-view. To escape this double bind, educators posited (various versions of) an objectively verifiable endpoint of human development, and embraced pedagogical theories by which such an endpoint could be reached without the "indoctrination" of controversial ideas.

To justify their newfound authority, Progressive Era educators needed to reconcile three potentially divergent goals. First, they had to assert objective expertise, to lay claim to a science of education. Second, they needed to square their claims to scientific knowledge with individual rights to self-determination and freedom of belief. (Art, which several important philosophical traditions understood as the complete mobilization of all powers of the individual, presented a limit case for this second goal.) Third, they needed to answer the demand for progress, to prepare the nation to meet the social, cultural, civic, and economic challenges posed by the dislocations of the post-Civil War period.

We have seen how Montessori addressed each of these conditions. Her science of education was, ostensibly, quite thoroughgoing, based on patient and objective observations. It was anomalous, however, in two ways. First, Montessori oriented her scientific ideas around assumptions about the purposiveness of the cosmos that were essentially religious. Second, she was something of a vulgar positivist, and believed that her observations, once gathered, would be the last word. As a result, she discounted the ideal of dialogue among communities of scientists, and latched onto idiosyncratic positions (regarding, for instance, the transfer of training hypothesis) that increasingly distanced her from the scientific mainstream. Nonetheless, to lay audiences, and at first blush even to experts, she appeared to satisfy demands for rigor and objectivity.

With the near-silence she demanded of her directresses, and the freedom of movement and activity that she allowed her individual pupils, she also gave a strong impression of pedagogical libertarianism and respect for individual differences. Yet her theory of personality suggested that every person is

animated by a single hormic impulse, and that individual differences were the result of “regressions” from “normal” development. Although she believed that everyone takes developmental steps in a slightly different order, she recognized only one type of normalized personality. Similarly, while she believed that individual identity is formed in a social context (in her theory of the social embryo), she did not acknowledge the extent to which individuals are and must be embedded in particular cultures and civilizations. She had no plan for passing on accumulated knowledge and practices. She worked with the youngest children because she wanted to start with blank slates. Montessori education recognizes a certain sphere (the order in which hormic development unfolds) in which autonomy is inviolable, but places strict and somewhat arbitrary limits on everything outside of that sphere, especially imaginative exercises of the Froebel kind. Although she wrote about the importance of the artistic imagination, she believed that it was best trained by sticking to her rather rigid program of sense-education.

Montessori education was intended to further social progress by promoting literacy, scientific habits of observation (relieving pressure on watchdog institutions like the FDA), self-reliance (relieving pressure on welfare institutions such as asylums), and peacefulness. Rather than training children in the skills necessary to craft and maintain social institutions, however, she relied exclusively on the normalization of individual character. One reason she appealed to Americans, no doubt, is that she affirmed a common sentiment, which Walter Lippmann labeled the ideal of the “omnicompetent citizen,” according to which government can be strictly limited because individual citizens are capable of solving problems on their own. While American progressives saw the increasing complexity of social life as the source of novel problems for education, Montessori believed that the answer to complexity was to double down on her own rigorous simplicity. Changing her curriculum in response to novel circumstances would have gone against the whole spirit of her educational thought.

In sum, Montessori rose to the three major challenges facing Progressive Era educators, but only by significantly oversimplifying each. As awareness of her reductionism spread, through the writings of skeptics such as William Heard Kilpatrick, her appeal diminished. Also, her difficulty extending her educational ideas into the middle school and the high school meant that she could not dislodge rival philosophies, such as Herbartianism, that were at home in those environments.

Cather shares much of Montessori's basic outlook. Like her, she views the project of self-formation, and more specifically the project of artistic development, as a matter of accepting and channeling inevitable, overwhelming cosmic forces with quiet deliberateness, "armored in calm." Whereas Montessori imagines people accepting the influence of something fundamentally benevolent, and imagines the feeling of such acceptance as beatific, for Cather vital forces are shot through with darkness as well as light, and the tenor of her acceptance is tragic. Many of the complexities that Montessori waves or wishes away, Cather, with greater awareness, embraces. For instance, although Montessori cannot make a persuasive connection between her program of passive channeling and social progress, she asserts that such a connection is bound, abstractly, to exist. Cather, for her part, accepts that this connection is nonexistent, and does not expect the world to become much better than it is. For Montessori, improvement comes from inner growth rather than social innovation, in the sense that if people orient themselves toward their own inner perfectibility, they can do without novel social institutions. For Cather, improvement comes from inner growth simply because the most significant problems are those that people face alone. Finally, Cather's idea of art, like these other ideas, resembles Montessori's but incorporates darkness and disappointment. For Montessori, art allows us to cleave more closely to the path of *horme*, following its upward trajectory into higher and higher realms of personal, social, and ecological harmony. For Cather, by contrast, art, in clarifying the course of cosmic energy, simply allows us to face facts more squarely, to perceive the unruliness and insatiability of

nature, and human nature, in its correct proportions. Montessori sees art as part of an ongoing project of liberating vital energies, in Fisher's words the "unchaining of great natural forces for good which have been kept locked and padlocked by our inertia, short-sightedness, [and] lack of confidence in human nature." Cather sees it as part of a project of accepting limitations. One of the first steps in the education of Cather's artists is, like St. Peter's seamstress, the devout Augusta, to squarely face the worst:

He used to say that he didn't mind hearing Augusta announce these deaths which seemed to happen so frequently along her way, because her manner of speaking about it made death seem less uncomfortable. She hadn't any of the sentimentality that comes from a fear of dying. She talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy March, or any of the sadnesses of nature.³¹⁸

Augusta, however, is not the endpoint of Catherian aesthetic education, but rather a counterpoint to Outland's and St. Peter's undue optimism about the promise of life sheltered from the Langtrys and Smithsonian directors of the world. She sees these men's hopefulness as a mere distraction from enduring truths. The artist, for Cather, must synthesize Augusta and Outland, recognizing both the importance of the Desire that drives life forward and its inability to ever come to a resting point (at least, one that is not a stagnant pool). Thea Kronborg strikes this balance as, to the metaphorical tune of water "debouched" from one vessel to another, and of tides rising and receding, she acknowledges the Desiring "second selves" within people, taking them up, showing them to themselves, and sending them on their difficult way again, temporarily refreshed.

318. Cather, *Professor's House*, p. 284.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Social Efficiency Educators:

To Lens-Shape Cruelly Smooth-Ground

“The Yellow Wall-Paper” is often read as a parable about smothering domesticity. Confined in a room with “barred windows” and a wallpaper that “becomes bars” in the moonlight, her movements strictly policed by her husband, its narrator slips into a claustrophobic madness that reflects the limitations of her social role. The story, as Gilman explains in the essay “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper,’” lodges a protest against Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure, which treated nervous exhaustion by means of the same housebound immobility that, in Gilman's case, was actually its cause. Gilman felt at her best when she was “A Woman-at-Large,” crisscrossing the country on a constant stream of speaking engagements, unencumbered by domestic duties. This free and solitary movement, however, may not be a sufficient cure. In the daytime, the “Yellow Wall-Paper” narrator sees the woman who is, by night, trapped in the wallpaper, crawling about “away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.” This is not an image of health.³¹⁹

Underlying the crazy-making constrictions of domesticity, for Gilman, are the deeper deformations of what she calls “personality” itself, meaning a self-sufficient individuality that looks inward rather than outward for fulfillment. “We exist, function, and develop in organic [social] relation, not as distinct individuals,” she declares in *Social Ethics*. “Of course, we visibly *are* individuals, and still have a considerable range of individual interests, but so do the constituent cells of our own bodies, when microscopically examined.” Hence, she writes elsewhere, “a man or woman to-day, who has no interest beyond the directly personal, is as out of place among real human beings as an ape would be – almost.” The “Yellow Wall-Paper” narrator becomes such an ape as she regresses from bipedalism to

319. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, and Denise D. Knight. *Herland, The Yellow Wall-paper, and Selected Writings*. New York: Penguin, 1999, pp. 169, 176; Davis, Cynthia J. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2010, p. 175; Gilman, *Herland, The Yellow Wall-Paper, and Selected Writings*, p. 179.

scooching about on all fours. Only when the “social energies” that move through, but do not spring from, the individual receive their “natural expression [in] world-service,” she asserts in *The Home*, will they stop “work[ing] morbidly in manifold disease.” The typical American household, with its “spirit of ‘me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four, and no more’” blocks the impulse for world-service, but so too does the radical individualism of the romantic subject. “We have our quatum [...] of modern poets,” writes an appreciative reviewer of Gilman's poetry, “who keep us informed as to how they feel on occasions of all human experiences; what they think of stars and flowers, and how it feels to be lonesome, and what effect the night wind has on one's general estimate of things in general. But we look forward to a time when – with the growth of the social consciousness – the poet will conclude to remove his analytical microscope from the contemplation of his private emotions [...] to submerge himself in the national life of his people.” Gilman, in the words of another reviewer “more a telescope than a microscope person,” would have agreed.³²⁰

The Social Efficiency Movement: A Group Portrait

Transcending this kind of “personality” is the central concern of Gilman's educational thought. Like Abraham Cahan, Gilman is an educational theorist in her own right, and a prolific one. She places schooling and childrearing at the center of tracts such as *Concerning Children* (1900), *Our Brains and What Ails Them* (1912), and *Social Ethics* (1914), as well as her first two utopian novels, *Moving the Mountain* (1911) and *Herland* (1915), and her coming-of-age novel *Benigna Machiavelli* (1916). As we shall see, she was strongly influenced by the kindergarten movement, with its emphasis

320. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, Michael R. Hill, and Mary Jo Deegan. *Social Ethics: Sociology and the Future of Society*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004 (1914), p. 5; Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, pp. xvi, 83; Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998 (1898), p. 41; Karpinski, Joanne B., ed. *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. New York: G.K. Hall (1992), pp. 45, 58.

on “unconscious learning” via educational games and environments rather than the memory drills so common the nineteenth-century classroom. Unlike most kindergarten enthusiasts, however, who believed that the free unfolding of children's personality would naturally lead to a better world, Gilman believed that educators had a responsibility to steer students toward the various specialized vocational roles necessary to a progressive society, and that it was only in these roles that one could be said to express oneself. These beliefs align her with the social efficiency movement, whose family tree includes the sociologists Lester Frank Ward (a hero of Gilman's, to whom she dedicated *Women and Economics*) and Edward A. Ross (Gilman's longtime correspondent and Ward's nephew by marriage) and the professors of education Samuel Dutton, David Snedden (a student of Dutton and Ross), and Franklin Bobbitt.

Other Progressive Era educators, including the kindergartners, the Montessorians, the Herbartians, the disciples of John Dewey, William Torrey Harris, and G. Stanley Hall, and even those who stubbornly clung to the theory of mental discipline, contended that they could educate toward both social harmony and individual flourishing because a truly well-rounded, self-realized person would, by virtue of certain innate sentiments or faculties, come to view the constraints of social life as liberating. In the words of Friedrich Schiller, whose theory of *Bildung* anticipates the dynamics of educational professionalization, if “the inner man is at one with himself,” then “the State will be simply the interpreter of his fine instinct, the clearer expression of his inner legislation.” For the social efficiency educators, as for Gilman, this “inner man” is a dubious proposition. “What supports the social edifice is not innate goodwill but an artificial composition of sentiments provided by society through its system of control,” as Ross unapologetically puts it.³²¹

Lester Frank Ward's theory of “telic evolution,” expounded in his massive *Dynamic Sociology* (1883), struck the keynote for the social efficiency movement. Like such post-Darwinian

321. McMahon, Sean H. *Social Control & Public Intellect: The Legacy of Edward A. Ross*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1999, p. 45.

thinkers as Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, Ward believes that societies as well as organisms are subject to evolutionary pressures, but unlike them, he believes that humanity, because of its intelligence, has the power to create its own environment, and hence to direct its own evolution toward ends of its choosing. Describing himself as a “Neo-Lamarckian,” he holds that it is possible to alter human nature by deciding to engage in different patterns of behavior. The only constant, for Ward, is the human capacity to make such decisions, which he calls the faculty of “conation.” The purpose of the social sciences, he argues, is to extend that power of coherent willing to society as a whole. Ward's aim is to overturn false doctrines of necessity, such as the theory of laissez-faire, which prevent society from choosing its own fate.

In the hands of Edward A. Ross, these ideas take a discomfiting turn toward Foucauldian discipline. For Ross, human malleability promises not individual freedom but, per the title of his 1901 magnum opus, *Social Control*: “that ascendancy over the aims and acts of the individual which is exerted on behalf of the group.” Like pedestrians at a busy intersection, Ross argues, one should expect that “men living in propinquity will continually fall afoul of one another” unless some combination of habits and laws prevents them from doing so. Like Schiller looking back with anguish on the degeneration of the French Revolution into the Terror, Ross, while exalting the principle of individual agency (albeit in the racially particularized figure of “the restless, striving, doing Aryan, with his personal ambition, his lust for power”), fears that it will lead to an anarchic “man-to-man struggle” unless it is restrained by cultural norms. While the external control imposed by aristocracies tends to breed rebellion, “when we bind from within,” using culture, we leave the prideful citizen with “the illusion of self-direction even at the very moment he martyrizs himself for the ideal we have sedulously impressed upon him.” For Schiller, such a disciplinary project is justified only when it expresses an “inner legislation” native to the human heart, and thus does not infringe the individual's inviolable right to self-determination. For Ross, on the other hand, inner legislation is simply external

pressures that have been internalized. “There are, of course, no abstract, indefeasible rights belonging to man as man,” he declares; “there are no 'immutable laws' or 'eternal principles' limiting the interferences of the state.” Nonetheless, he concedes, “it is sometimes well to act as if there were,” if only because people who feel free are easier to manage. Ross argues that social control should be centralized in a self-regulating clique of sociologists, experts who understand the physiology of the social organism and how it responds to such environmental factors as technology and demography. Rather than acting directly, however, these sociologists will work with the leadership of other, semi-independent “radiant points of social control” such as the legal system, the church, the press, and the school. This last is a particularly effective vector of control, Ross notes, because children are more “suggestible” than adults, and the “subtle Jesuitry” of the new sciences of education will only make them more so.³²²

As David Snedden's biographer, Walter Drost, observes, the social efficiency movement is a hybrid of Ross's “social control” and the ethos of “social service” associated with the Teachers College professor Samuel Dutton. For Dutton, as for Ross, the individual is to be subordinated to the interests of social harmony; for Dutton, however, this is a project that individuals can be expected to undertake willingly, because it is through such selfless service that people achieve self-realization. “The whole creation,” Dutton sermonizes in his *Social Phases of Education in School and Home* (1899), “reflects the idea that life exists for life. [...] Certain plant forms render aid to others by furnishing shade and protection and by conserving moisture. The social spirit exhibited by certain animals,” such as a bird species that selflessly cleans the teeth of crocodiles, “may well put to shame the selfishness revealed in some phases of human conduct.” (Dutton seems unaware that this is the bird's food source, and thus that the interaction is mutually beneficial, not purely altruistic.) What is true of plants and animals is

322. Drost, Walter H. *David Snedden and Education for Social Efficiency*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1967, p. 29; Ross, Edward A. *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order*. University Press of the Pacific, 2002 (1901), pp. 3-5, 244, 420.

doubly true of people, he declares, and “the notion that man's physical, moral, and spiritual welfare are best conserved through [socially] useful activity is fast becoming an accepted truth by all civilized peoples.” Society, for Dutton, is, with the progress of social science, becoming a glorious interchange of mutual sacrifice, in which people work not to eat, but to maintain increasingly interdependent human networks. “It is essential,” he writes, “that toilers of every class should be conscious of their social obligations, that they should have a friendly regard for those who render service in other departments.”³²³

The perspective of the University of Chicago education professor Franklin Bobbitt differs from that of Ross, for whom individualism is merely “the illusion of self-direction,” and that of Dutton, for whom it is something to be ecstatically transcended. For Bobbitt, “social service does not mean self-renunciation. Self-interest cannot be eliminated.” Self-interest, however, can be either “narrow” and “ignorant” or “enlightened,” and in the latter case the citizen “recognizes that individual welfare at its highest comes only through general community welfare at its highest.” As each kind of work is “more and more given its proper measure of social reward and honor,” the quality of self-interest will improve. Because self-interest is “the steam that runs the whole machine” of society, Bobbitt, like all of the members of the social efficiency movement, rejects the “feudal” idea of Taylorization, which corrodes workers' autonomy by reducing labor to a series of discrete steps to be arranged by expert managers. Instead, he suggests that workers, who understand their work better than their employers do, be given more control. “Recognized as men, they become men,” he writes, and “act like men; and the curve of their operative efficiency mounts rapidly upward.” The efficiency of group processes is paramount for Bobbitt, just as much as for Ross, but for Bobbitt individual autonomy is itself a source of efficiency, whereas for Ross it is merely a useful fiction.³²⁴

323. Drost, *David Snedden*, p. 47; Dutton, Samuel T. *Social Phases of Education in the School and the Home*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1900, pp. 3, 8, 12.

324. Bobbitt, John Franklin. *The Curriculum*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1918, pp. 61-62, 79.

For the Teachers College professor David Snedden, the blandest, bluntest, and most institutionally influential member of the social efficiency movement, the idea of individual autonomy is hardly important enough to mention. Snedden, a consummate administrative progressive who was known for such phrases as “Education for the Rank and File” and “education for followership,” takes it for granted that the school system's mission is to train people to fill the industrial economy's rapidly multiplying specialized roles, however unpleasant and unappreciated some of these roles might be. To do this job efficiently requires, he argues, that educators “determine the probable destination” of each student based on his or her membership in a “case group,” Snedden's euphemism for a social class. There is “immense wastage involved,” he maintains, “when society leaves [vocational training] to [the] accident or uncertainty of individual choice.” The best thing one can do for someone bound to be a carpenter, for example, is, for Snedden, to make him a very good carpenter who can command high wages. Although he insists that the assignment of a student to a case group should be made after consultation among the student, her parents, and school officials, in practice John Dewey's accusation that Snedden promoted “social predestination, by means of narrow trade-training” seems justified.³²⁵

The school's role in subject-formation, for Snedden, boils down to the imperative that the student “have his social tendencies developed, and his unsocial tendencies thwarted in their development.” These tendencies, far from constituting an integral mental architecture, are simply an unstructured grab-bag of more and less useful instincts. “It is desirable,” he observes, “usually to increase and widen sympathy with suffering, and to diminish the instinct to fight; it is desirable to stimulate the emotional tendencies which make for cooperation, and diminish those which make aggressive and selfish rivalry too prominent. It is desirable to promote an appreciation of the value of persistent and honest labor and to lessen the tendencies to profit at the cost of some one else.” In

325. Drost, *David Snedden*, pp. 4, 41, 43; Lebaree, David F. “How Dewey lost: The Victory of David Snedden and Social Efficiency in the Reform of American Education.” In Daniel Tröhler, Thomas Schlag, and Fritz Osterwalder (Eds.), *Pragmatism and Modernities* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers (2010), 163-188, p. 167.

encouraging the socially useful and discouraging the socially harmful tendencies, Snedden, unlike Ross, sees no need to conceal his agenda. Convincing the student that the way to self-realization is through service (a la Dutton), or nurturing her sense of autonomy (a la Ross) would be neither truthful nor, more importantly, useful.³²⁶

When Gilman writes of shifting one's energies from the “directly personal” to “world-service,” she means something slightly different from any of these other thinkers, although the family resemblances between her ideas and theirs should become clear. Sometimes she insists, like Bobbitt, that enlightened self-interest converges on social service. Here, for instance, is part of a catechism for children inserted into *Social Ethics*:

Q: What is to be said of a man who raises poor food, who manufactures bad food, who puts poison in food to sell – that he himself may make more money?

A: He is a traitor, and enemy of society, and a fool.

Q: Why a fool?

A: Because society is one living thing; and to poison anybody is also poisoning oneself. It is like a man injecting poison into his own foot and denying that it hurt him, on the ground that it was a long way off.

Q: But cannot a man injure a great many other people, and yet live comfortably himself – he and his family?

A: Yes – so long as he is a fool. He does not see the evil he has done, and he does not see how it affects him, and his family. He could not be 'comfortable' if he were wiser.

At other times, like Dutton, she casts social service as a kind of altruism. In *Moving the Mountain*, her 1911 “baby utopia” set in 1940s America, public works projects such as road-building are carried out by a WPA-like “Social Service Union.” The incredulous protagonist, who has returned to America after thirty years in Tibet, wonders why this Union is never short-staffed despite the fact that an incrementally advancing socialism has made it unnecessary to do such dirty work in order to support oneself. His guides explain that “the same spirit that used to give us crusaders and missionaries now gave plenty of enthusiastic workers [...] It [is] not work for oneself [...] work is social service — social

326. Drost, *David Snedden*, p. 41.

service is religion — that's about it.”³²⁷

Gilman's most striking figure for the relationship between individual and social ends draws on both of these perspectives, as well as the idea, found in the work of both Ward and Dewey, that self-realization is equivalent to the full “performance of function,” to “getting at all that is in oneself,” leaving none of one's cards unplayed. “Humanity,” she writes, “is engaged in an enormous game. We are set to learn How to Live Together [...] to the best advantage, with the least waste of effort.” An avid solitaire player who once wrote an angry letter protesting a railroad's policy against playing cards, she frequently returns to the game metaphor when discussing the nature of right action. “Here is the human game,” she proclaims, “which we are here to learn to play: how to get on together to our best mutual advantage.” At times it seems that one plays the Human Game, the game of How to Live Together, simply because it is stimulating. “It is easier to do harm than to do good,” muses Gilman's fictional alter ego Benigna Machiavelli. “Any small boy can do mischief – or girl, either. Doing good things is more difficult and therefore more interesting.”³²⁸ Throughout Gilman's ethical writings, it is difficult to disentangle motives of self-interest, altruistic service, and the thrill of achievement. For now, we can merely note that all of these elements are present.³²⁹

Specialization as Self-Realization

327. Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 94; Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Herland Trilogy: Moving the Mountain, Herland, with Her in Ourland*. [S.l.]: Wilder Publications, Limi, 2011 (1911, 1915, 1916), p. 55.

328. Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Echo Library, 2007, p. 220; Gilman, *Social Ethics*, pp. 29, 32; Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Benigna Machiavelli*. Santa Barbara, CA.: Bandanna, 1994 (1916), p. 59.

329. Gilman's use of game-playing as a figure for the human desire to function at full capacity parallels similar discussions in Bobbitt's work. (The other figures in the social efficiency movement do not seem to have considered play.) According to Bobbitt, “the thing that one enjoys is the thing at which one will strain every nerve. Given a healthy play-motive and the right opportunity, it is like a high-power engine and a straight track ahead” (Bobbitt 17). Thus, he argues, teachers should harness the play-motive whenever possible. For Bobbitt and Gilman, however, play is not a source of distinct moral value as it is for Schiller, who sees it as a uniquely autonomous activity, and argues that it undermines the foundations of coercion. Nor is it a window into children's hidden instincts and endowments, as it is for Montessori.

Compared with their educational contemporaries, the social efficiency educators have an unusually plastic picture of human nature. They see individual identity as a variable in a problem whose solution would be an efficient society free of unnecessary friction. Some of them, such as Dutton, believe that citizens should willingly participate in solving of this problem, while others, such as Ross, think it best that they not be completely aware of their role. All agree, however, that in school the child's personality is not so much discovered or exfoliated as forged. For Horace Mann and other advocates of traditional mental discipline pedagogy, as for a thinker like Ross, education should exaggerate some human endowments and suppress others, aiming for a personality that is not so much well-rounded (in, say, Schiller's sense of the balanced development of intellectual and emotional faculties) as well-disciplined. While Mann looks to the individual's reason to enforce this discipline, however, Ross and the other social efficiency educators place social institutions, and ultimately culture itself, as curated by sociologists, in that role.

Like all American educators since Mann, the social efficiency educators aim to produce model democratic citizens. They imagine citizens, however, not, like Dewey, as participants in open-ended debates about values and priorities, but as dutiful caretakers of what Snedden calls “civic efficiency.” It is for “sociology,” he writes, to “answer endless questions as to what is 'the good community life,'” determining efficient policies in a laundry list of areas including immigration, housing, and above all education. Sociologists, however, are researchers, not executives, and their ideas need to be implemented by politicians, whom he sees merely as providers of a “specialized service for which compensation is given as in other fields.” “Voting,” he goes on, “means simply collective employment of this specialized service [...] The essence of general civic education is to produce good employers of civic workers, that is, persons who will have a fairly clear conception of the task to be done, and who will know how to choose efficient and honest employees.” For Bobbitt, civic responsibility goes beyond voting, but remains bounded by the notion of efficient execution. Civic

education, he argues, means developing the ability to perform an assortment of “functions,” and cannot proceed until educators “know with particularity what they are.” He offers a list of thirty functions of municipal citizenship (though “the list is not exhaustive”), including “keeping the city clean,” “prevention of flies and mosquitoes,” “care of insect-destroying birds,” “providing for a sanitary milk-supply,” and so forth. Democracy, for these thinkers, has little to do with pluralism or public deliberation.³³⁰

The same might be said of Gilman. In *Herland*, the visitor Van finds that “the most salient quality in all their institutions was reasonableness,” thanks to the wise oversight of experts. “Those who showed an early tendency to observe, to discriminate, to suggest, were given special training for that function,” we learn, “and some of their highest officials spent their time in the most careful study of one or another branch of work, with a view to its further improvement.” *Herland* is silent, however, about the political processes by which these improvements are decided upon and implemented, and what input, if any, the average Herlander is allowed. No matter, though: “where we have [...] a wide range of differences, often irreconcilable,” Van reports, “these people were smoothly and firmly agreed on most of the basic principles of their life; and not only agreed in principle, but accustomed for these sixty-odd generations to act on those principles”³³¹

Despite their assumption, and sometimes celebration, of consensus in the political realm, Gilman and the social efficiency educators emphasize individual difference, and even uniqueness, in the vocational sphere. Unlike Schiller, Mann, Montessori, or the Herbartians, for whom the well-ordered society is reflected in microcosm in the identically well-ordered minds of each citizen, for them social order depends on differentiation of function. “The more perfect the differentiation of labor

330. Drost, *David Snedden*, p. 113; Snedden, David. “The Socially Efficient Community.” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 2:8 (April 1929), 464-470, p. 464; Snedden, David. “What of Liberal Education?” *The Atlantic* 190 (January 1912), 111-117, p. 114; Bobbit, *Curriculum*, pp. 142-43.

331. Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, p. 215.

and exchange of product,” Gilman writes in *Women and Economics*, “the more perfect is th[e] civilization.” The obvious advantage of specialization is that it creates efficiencies. For Gilman, Bobbitt, and Dutton, however, it also promotes the altruistic ethos of social service, since the specialist, by definition, does not participate in all of the activities necessary to sustain her own life. “To develop special functions, so that we depend for our living on society's return for services that can be of no direct use to ourselves, – this,” Gilman writes, “is civilization, our human glory and race-distinction.” In *Social Ethics*, after listing several eternal human virtues, she adds two new ones that gain in importance as civilization progresses. One is “efficiency”; the other she calls “integrity of function,” which she defines as “doing the special work one is meant to do in the world, the fulfillment of a real social service.” Integrity of function is a virtue because it implies service to others; it is also, for Gilman, a form of self-realization. If laborers in all fields could understand that the very narrowness of their working life is responsible for the breadth of social life, she argues in *Our Brains and What Ails Them*, they would grow as people. “If the master plumber could discourse upon the sanitary system in Knossos, the Cloaca Maxima, the giant sewers of Paris; and if the young plumber, learning, learned the breadth of all modern sanitary knowledge, and gloried in his work as vitally essential to our social life,” she predicts, “we should find an improvement not only in plumbing, but in plumbers.”³³²

Because they make the specialized occupation, rather than participation in politics or culture, the expression of the individual's distinctive identity, the social efficiency educators are anxious to demonstrate that every job, no matter how apparently thankless, can be a source of self-worth. Bobbitt notes that the social service ethos, and the “full-statured, socially-honored manhood” that goes with it, has traditionally been associated with “professional and managerial” work, while wage labor has been seen as a selfish exchange of time for money. This sense of professionals' “ethical superiority to commercial, mechanical, agricultural, or household occupations,” however, is

332. Gilman, *Women and Economics*, pp. 4, 37; Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 58; Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “Our Brains and What Ails Them.” Serialized in *Forerunner* 3 (1912), p. 217.

declining “visibly and rapidly” as people see all work's relation to “the general welfare” more clearly, and will decline even faster as social efficiency educators emphasize this relation in school. The socially efficient school might, especially under Snedden's predestinarian scheme, pigeonhole one in a program of narrow trade training, but it would strive to make that pigeonhole feel and appear dignified.³³³

As her remarks about plumbers indicate, Gilman shares this commitment to raising all labor to the dignity of the professions. She is, of course, particularly well-known for extending it to traditional women's work, from cooking and cleaning to looking after young children. As she argues in *Women and Economics*, *Concerning Children*, and *The Home* (1903), and dramatizes in the novel *What Diantha Did* (1910), these tasks can be performed more efficiently by dedicated specialists than by unpaid wives and mothers whom Gilman sees as hapless amateurs. In the city, she calls for apartment buildings to establish communal kitchens, laundries, and nurseries; in the country, she imagines that houses can be connected, via tunnels, to outbuildings where these services are provided. Under this plan, women, liberated from unpaid domestic labor, will be free to pursue their own specialized work, even if that work happens to be cooking or cleaning. Women's ennobling experience of specialization is, for Gilman, a more important source of empowerment than suffrage itself. “The banner advanced [by the women's movement] proclaims 'equality before the law,' woman's share in political freedom,” she observes; “but the main line of progress is and has been toward economic equality and freedom.”³³⁴

Even motherhood itself – meaning, Gilman is careful to specify, the rearing of young children, not the biological function – should not be left to the unprepared everywoman, the “natural mother” who “loves and labours without knowledge.” She calls for the rise of the “unnatural mother,” who “has added a trained intellect to a warm heart” and applies this expertise in the nursery, preschool,

333. Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, pp. 62, 58.

334. Gilman, *Women and Economics*, p. 72.

or classroom, “lifting the standard of child-culture for all.” The unnatural mother is all the more necessary because childhood itself has lengthened with the progress of civilization, and specifically with the intensification of occupational specialization. “It does not take very long to mature the group of faculties required for maintaining individual life,” Gilman asserts, but “it does take long to mature the group of faculties required to maintain social life.” She posits that “the less developed grades of society, filling those simpler social functions which require less specialisation” marry and become self-supporting at a relatively young age (“in the South, she writes, “it was common to set a little black child to take care of an older white one: the pickaninny matures much more rapidly”). Specialization, for Gilman, is not just the end goal of education, but the secret purpose of childhood itself. Far from representing an imposition on a capacious human nature, it is the thing that most distinguishes humans from “the animals.”³³⁵

If specialization is a natural expression of individuality, however, what to make of the fact that it is the market, rather than the individual, that determines which jobs are available? Not every child who might eventually become, say, an actress or a professor of English will be able to support herself doing so. Gilman envisions an education in which “from his first eager interest in almost everything, up along the gradually narrowing lines of personal specialisation, each child should be led with the least possible waste of time and nervous energy,” but does not make it clear whether the teacher is discovering a specialization latent in the child, leading the child to a specialization demanded by the market, à la Snedden, or some combination of these two options. In *Herland*, children's interest in various immediate phenomena “widen[s] out,” under the wise guidance of adults, “into contact with an endless range of common interests,” culminating in an understanding of their relation to “the national prosperity.” Ellador, the novel's exemplary Herlander, describes her own process of specialization as a seamless process of self-development. She finds a butterfly and brings it to an insect

335. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Concerning Children*. Boston: Small, Maynard &, 1900, p. 277, 293-94.

specialist, who tells her that it is one of the last members of a nut-eating species that the Herlanders are trying to eradicate. "Everybody congratulated me," she recalls. "I grew a foot, it seemed to me, and determined then and there to be a forester." The combination of a child's irrepressible curiosity about a particular thing with the deep knowledge of the insect expert and the technocratic coordination of Herland society has led Ellador to both social service and self-realization.³³⁶

This smooth path to specialization is not the rule, however. The Herlander Somel explains to Van that "education is our highest art, only allowed to our highest artists." What becomes of those to whom a preferred occupation is not "allowed"? Gilman hints at two answers to this question. In Herland, Van learns, "special knowledge is open to all, as they desire it" even those who do not apply it vocationally. Most Herlanders "take up several" specializations, "some for their regular work, some to grow with" as avocations (though it is hard to imagine education, which the Herlanders take so seriously, being practiced by amateurs). Gilman expands on this idea in *Our Brains and What Ails Them*, observing that "so soon as a growing society devise[s] the means of supplying the basic needs of existence," a "saved portion" of "energy" is created: the efficiencies of cooperation make it unnecessary for each person to tap her full potential. Without avocations, that is, without play, the average individual would "lapse into a lower condition" than they would have maintained in "the pre-social plane." Bobbitt echoes this point in *The Curriculum*, observing that "heredity provides the possibility of a much fuller development than demanded by the conditions of civilization; and play must make up the deficit." He illustrates this point with a series of charts (Figure 1):

336. Gilman, *Concerning Children*, p. 144; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 199-200.

Figure 1

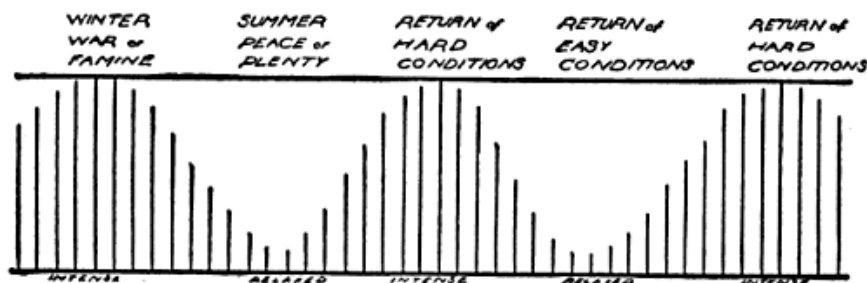


FIG. 8. The varying degrees of intensity in man's primitive biological struggle. Represented by the height of the vertical lines.

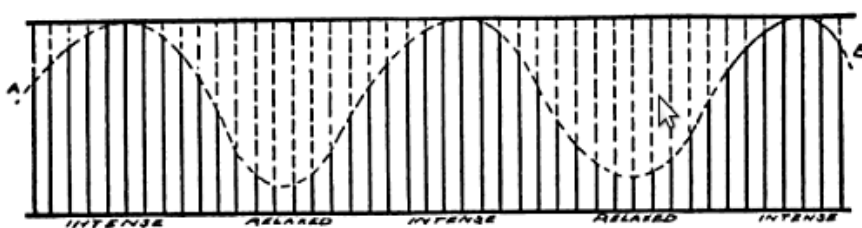


FIG. 9. The relatively constant degree of preparedness needed for the inconstant conditions of primitive life. Needed preparedness represented by the total vertical lines. The portion above the curved line *AB* to be provided through **play**-activities.



FIG. 10. The relaxed and relatively unchanging intensity in man's present-day biological struggle.

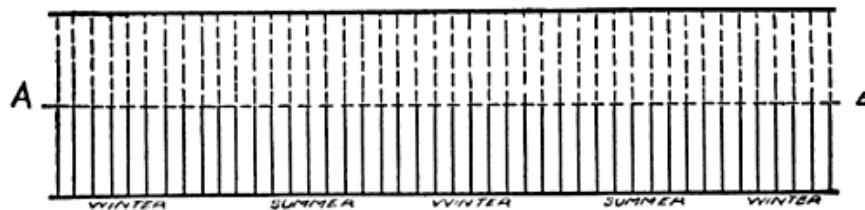


FIG. 11. To represent the portion of man's potential development that in our present civilized state is dependent upon continuing **play**-activities.

In *Moving the Mountain*, Gilman approaches the problem from a different angle. Efficiency has made it possible to maintain the current standard of living while the average person works only two hours a day, and resource sharing has removed the incentive to work long hours. Thus a job that might have been filled by one person can be filled instead by four or five, and more kinds of work are available to more people. Unpleasant jobs are either handled by the Social Service Union described above, or undertaken as enlightening “experience-work” by young people looking to build skills and understand the world. Avocations, job-sharing, and the relegation of undesirable jobs to experience-work compensate, to some extent, for the possibility that, by so exclusively linking self-realization to occupational specialization, the education system allows the self to be shaped by the economy, rather than shaping people whose inner resources can withstand the strain of economic life. But they do not eradicate it.³³⁷

Herland and the Province of Zond

Like many educational thinkers of the Progressive Era, the social efficiency educators were strongly influenced by studies, especially those of the Harvard psychologist Edward Thorndike, that seemed to disprove the possibility of “transfer of training.” Thorndike's target was the theory of mental faculties – the reason, the will, the memory, and so on – which served as the psychological lingua franca of American education in the nineteenth century. According to faculty psychology, one could train, say, the memory by learning lists of dates, and expect recall to improve in unrelated exercises with vocabulary. Thorndike set out to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the only way to improve one's memory for vocabulary was to memorize vocabulary. In one 1901 study by Thorndike and R.S.

Woodward, “The Influence of Improvement in One Mental Function upon the Efficiency of Other

337. Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 183, 203; Gilman, “Our Brains,” p. 53; Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, pp. 212, 224-25; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, p. 14.

Functions,” subjects were trained to estimate the area of rectangles and then asked to estimate the area of non-rectangular figures. (According to some psychologists this sort of spatial judgment was a distinct faculty.) The subjects' estimates for the non-rectangular figures did not improve. Thorndike and Woodward conclude that “improvement in any single mental function need not improve the ability in functions commonly called by the same name. It may injure it.” Echoes of Thorndike can be heard in, for instance, Bobbitt's assertion that “human life, however varied, consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for these specific activities. However numerous and diverse they may be for any social class, they can be discovered.” Or in Snedden's declaration that “‘culture,’ ‘mental training,’ ‘aesthetic appreciation,’ ‘the scientific spirit,’ are all too uncertain, too complex, and perhaps, in their general aspects, too impracticable of realization, to serve usefully as formulated goals of educational effort.”³³⁸

In combination with their focus on real-world occupations, the rejection of the transfer of training hypothesis leads the social efficiency educators to imagine the workplace itself (or, in the case of domestic labor, the home itself) as the best learning environment. As Massachusetts Commissioner of Education from 1909 to 1916, Snedden, for instance, proposed that “case groups” bound for the trades spend half of their school time in actual shops, and even those bound for the professions a quarter of their time. “Educational experiences must take place where they can be normal,” Bobbitt writes; that is, where they can accurately reflect the adult experiences they anticipate. “Frequently this is not at the schools.” While some experiences, such as reading history, are identical in school or out, many others are not. Bobbitt praises initiatives such as the Iowa Home-Work School-Credit Club, which integrates out-of-school activities into the curriculum. The following list indicates the number of different activities in various categories for which students may obtain credit through the Club:

Agricultural activities:

338. Quoted in Kliebard, Herbert. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*. New York : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 91-92; Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, p. 42; Snedden, “What of Liberal Education?”, p. 116.

Plants 45
Animals 18
Agricultural construction and farm economics 21

Home economics:

Sewing 23
Cooking 29
Laundry 17
Housekeeping 18
General construction, repairs, and other work with tools 59
Home duties of boys and girls 9
Health activities 20
Self-culture (home reading, music, etc) 16
Helping the aged, the weak, the ill, etc. 11
Business practice 6
Thrift activities 4
Civic activities 10
Club projects 24

One must determine “the abilities, attitudes, habits, appreciations, and forms of knowledge that men need” in “the world of affairs,” he concludes. “These will be the objectives of the curriculum. They will be numerous, definite, and particularized. The curriculum will then be that series of experiences which children and youth must have by way of attaining those objectives.”³³⁹

One consequence of these ideas is that the boundaries between the school and the rest of society are unusually porous for the social efficiency educators. For Ross, as we have seen, all social institutions can serve as “radiant points of social control,” and the school is, at most, a first among equals. Dutton similarly imagines the school serving not as the exclusive site of education, but as a “fountain of inspiration” for other educational agencies such as the home, the church, the library, and the newspaper. Conversely, Snedden admires the schools located in juvenile prisons, in which “the entire round of educational effort” is brought inside the school, including activities normally associated with the home, the church, and the workshop. Anticipating Bobbitt's praise for the Iowa Home-Work School-Credit Club, he speaks highly of credit systems in which juvenile delinquents earn their release by completing an endless round of workaday tasks. “Every hourly act, every faithfully executed task or

339. Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, pp. 35, 38, 42.

lesson, contributes to this end (release) or withholds the child from it,” he notes. “The result is a system of control which, for persistence and effectiveness, has no equal in the majority of cases; and which seems to contribute most effectively to character-building” (Drost 73). For similar reasons, Snedden admires “certain schools for Negroes and Indians,” such as the Hampton Institute, which also blur the lines between academics and everyday tasks – or rather, the tasks that educators expect the “case group” in question to encounter every day.³⁴⁰

For Aaron Gove, the nationally prominent superintendent of the Denver school system, this interpenetration of school and life is not so much a goal as a fact with which educators must catch up. In an 1899 talk to the National Education Association, “The Usurpation of the Home by the School,” he observes that “The American home is giving way more and more to the encroachments of the public school. The paternalism that is so evident in other lines of social and political economy casts its light and shadow across the threshold of the home.” Fathers are, increasingly, too preoccupied with breadwinning to educate their children; mothers, too, are entering the workforce, and public life generally, to the neglect of their traditional domestic duties; home industries, once a source of informal education, have been abandoned in favor of factory production. As to whether these developments are good or bad, he demurs: “whatever be the opinion, the condition is upon us.” (He specifically refers people upset about women's changing roles to Gilman, at that time “Mrs. Stetson.”) The school day, Gove argues, must become longer, so that the semi-neglected children of working parents do not “drift into trouble or impotence,” and the school must provide a wider range of instruction to compensate for the decline of home learning. “The modern course of study” should include, for instance, “outdoor work, field work, and inspection and observation of nature,” and take place “in the forest, on the playground, in the public garden, and amid collections of animals” as well as at the school.³⁴¹

340. Drost, *David Snedden*, pp. 47-48, 41.

341. Gove, Aaron. “The Usurpation of the Home by the School.” *Proceedings of the National Education Association*, 1899, pp. 182-85.

As we have seen, educational philosophies often describe idealized communities, which novelists, in turn, reimagine as they respond to these philosophies: Schiller's Aesthetic State and Goethe's Society of the Tower; the Herbartians' gradually expanding community of shared references (in their lingo, shared “apperceptive mass”) and Abraham Cahan's Jewish Lower East Side; Montessori's Casa dei Bambini and Willa Cather's Blue Mesa. The corresponding utopia for the social efficiency educators is the closed, unified, scientifically managed community in which the school acts as a nervous system, producing and distributing all human capital.

For Ward, sociology promises to help society act with one mind, taking coherent steps to better its condition rather than submitting to false doctrines that hamper coordination. “The social sciences,” for Ward, should “ethically and efficiently restrai[n] all of human behaviors into one positive direction.” For Ross, social progress consists of the replacement of “class control,” in which powerful groups impose order by “parasitically [...] sink[ing] their fangs into their fellows and subsist[ing] upon them,” with true “social control,” in which laws, norms, and institutions affect all people equally, while benevolent elites adjust these “points of control” to minimize wasteful “collisions” among people and groups. Because social control is, to a significant extent, based on shared culture rather than mere force, it is threatened by both internal class conflict and influxes of people from other cultures. For this reason (among others more explicitly eugenicist), Ross opposes immigration from non-Teutonic cultures, and especially from China. Gilman has similar concerns about immigration threatening the social order by undermining cultural cohesion. In *With Her in Ourland*, Ellador (always a mouthpiece for her creator) tells Van that immigrants “should be met like children [...] with adequate preparation, with the fullest and wisest education for their new place.” She recommends adding a government “department to definitely Americanize the newcomers, to teach them the language, spirit, traditions and customs of the country.” “Because you accept too many immigrants too indiscriminately and too quickly,” she admonishes, “you are only partially America, an America clogged and confused, weakened and

mismanaged, for lack of political compatibility.” Faithful readers of Gilman would have remembered Ellador's plan from *Moving the Mountain*, in which Long Island is converted into America's “Reception Room,” with “agricultural and industrial stations” to break new arrivals in to American ways of work, and “a graded series of dwellings where the use of modern conveniences is taught to all newcomers.” These facilities are “schools,” but their economic and educational functions are so perfectly interwoven that “you won't know [the schools] when you [...] see them.” The Reception Room both prepares immigrants to enter 1940 America's system of total unobtrusive coordination and is itself an exemplary instance of that coordination.³⁴²

Bobbitt, characteristically, makes similar points with greater regard for the individual's voluntary participation. In place of Ross's “class control” and “social control,” Bobbitt elaborates a distinction between “infra-group” and “extra-group” behaviors. When we see people as members of the same group, he writes, we treat them with “truthfulness,” “loyalty,” “courtesy,” and so on; toward outsiders we display “deceit,” “hostility,” and “incivility.” This system works for isolated tribes, Bobbitt argues, but in modern societies one person might see another as either an insider or an outsider. One's employer, for instance, might be either fellow citizen or a member of an apparently hostile social class. The hostility, however, is never more than apparent, because modern society is like a “bodily organism” in which each group “becomes dependent upon all the others; and the others dependent upon it.” “As this recognition rises clear,” writes Bobbitt, “consciousness of membership within the large group becomes dominant in the members of all of the specialized groups and the extra-group attitudes of antagonism between constituent classes disappear.” This “large-group consciousness” allows specialization to take the form of social service rather than affiliation with one or another hostile class. Hence, for Bobbitt, “the problem of civic training is par excellence the development of large-group consciousness. If men understand the group social relations, and have right attitudes toward each other

342. McMahon, *Social Control*, p. 43; Ross, *Social Control*, p. 376; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 289, 22-23.

and toward the social whole, these automatically tend toward right action.” In keeping with his rejection of transfer of training, he predicts that “direct ethical instruction” in the precepts of large-group living will be ineffective, but that progress can be made if “they are actually able to provide the conditions of large-group living experience,” either directly (as in his idea to get students involved in local government) or indirectly, through the vicarious experience of reading. (We will have more to say about the social efficiency educators' ideas about reading below.) The outer limit of large-group consciousness is identification with the whole human race, but Bobbitt concedes that this is a distant goal.³⁴³

In an article on “The Socially Efficient Community,” Snedden describes an ideal setting for social efficiency education. The first criterion is something like large-group consciousness. A proper “community,” he stipulates, “embraces all the persons living and more or less cooperating in a given area. [...] Therefore, we can have [...] neighborhood village or urban communities, county communities [...] national and imperial communities, and even a 'world community.’” The community is defined by univocal coordination, not contesting interests; ideally, it should be a closed system. A perfectly “self-contained community [...] nearly severed from outside influences [...] can readily be conceived,” he insists, although “none completely such now exists on this globe.” Snedden imagines such a community, which he calls “the province of Zond,” and asks “on the basis of what eudemic programs can Zond conserve and advance its social efficiency?” He makes his usual prescriptions, calling for an education system that wastes nothing as it trains people in the minutiae of various narrowly defined jobs. In a shoe factory, for instance, “will be found two hundred distinct vocations – a few for persons of exceptionally low endowments, and many for persons of somewhat less than median native intelligence or physique. A man or young woman in one of these operative specialties will no more expect to be competent to work in another without a period of training than a dentist would

343. Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, pp. 129-31, 163.

similarly expect to work as an optometrist.” As for civic education, “Zond expects all adult members to be especially strong in conformist civic virtues – especially to the will of the majority as formally expressed in laws, ordinances, etc.,” although Snedden also considers the public's ability to make a good “choice of new executives.” Geographic isolation (perhaps, he suggests, due to mountainous terrain); an economy and political process driven by cooperation rather than competition; a school system hybridizing with and coordinating among all facets of social life: this might be Herland, a small country set high up on an inaccessible plateau where everything children learn only things related to “the national prosperity,” and the cities have a look of “order [...] something as college buildings stand in their quiet greens.”³⁴⁴

Virtue Is a Social Development

Among Ross's radiant points of social control is “enlightenment,” or the convergence of self-interest with the necessities of social control. Social control is itself simply the wise way of running society; as a person becomes wiser, she will, Ross argues, find herself in increasing agreement with its methods. Because enlightenment demands that the average person be “a reasonable creature,” it flourishes in “times of great educational enthusiasm,” and its devotees are likely to become educators. Because it demands a keen “discernment of social conditions,” it “hurries society toward consciousness of itself,” tending to produce “a rational theory of social relations,” and eventually “social science” itself. The major drawbacks to enlightenment, according to Ross, are its inability to address real discrepancies between the individual's immediate interests and the interests of society, and its “failing to reach the deep springs of human conduct,” the passions that are needed to fully cement esprit d'corps. Unlike enlightenment, these passions, for instance those connected with normative “ideal

344. Snedden, “Socially Efficient Community,” pp. 464-65, 468-69; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 199, 133.

types” (the ideal soldier, the ideal mother, and so on), depend on the engagement of other people, and are ineradicably relational. Enlightenment's solitary, rational morality takes one only so far; to try to make it do all the work of the social passions would be madness.³⁴⁵

Yet this, it appears from the testimony of the author and those around her, is just what Gilman attempted before the mental collapse depicted in “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” As a young woman, she kept up a strenuous regimen of gymnastics and extracurricular studying (her formal schooling was, for a woman of her social class, rather scanty). A proud descendent of the Beecher clan, she too hoped to be a crusader and moral exemplar, and took this responsibility as one of life's givens. “Let us premise and agree upon before starting,” she demands in *Women and Economics*, “that the duty of human life is progress, development; that we are here, not merely to live, but to grow, – not to be content with lean savagery or fat barbarism or sordid semi-civilization, but to toil on through the centuries, and build up the ever-nobler forms of life toward which social evolution tends. If this is not believed, if any hold that to keep alive and reproduce the species is the limit of our human duty, then they need look no farther here.” This heroic attitude took its toll, however. For the young Charlotte Perkins, her friend Alexander Black recalls, “at the elbow of all possible benevolences lurked the fearful figure of Duty. The thing that was right dominated all other things. Beauty and happiness had always to be justified – or was it excused?” This stern discipline was all the more draining because, rather than giving herself over to some preexisting, socially sanctioned program of uplift, she took it upon herself to develop, and prove the validity of, her own system. “No picture could be more disturbing, more profoundly pitiful, than that of a child building a conscious system of ethics,” writes Black. “Yet this is the picture I see in the adolescent years of Charlotte Perkins. The brain carried by that energetic body began, before it should have been through with dolls and dryads, to grapple with abstractions, to diagram this duty matter, to

345. Ross, *Social Control*, pp. 299-303.

piece together an original formula for explaining the world.”³⁴⁶

Although she lays some blame for the collapse depicted in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” on her first husband, Walter Stetson (“learn to doubt your judgment before it seeks to mould another life as it has mine,” she wrote to him shortly before her stay at Mitchell's sanitarium), she reserves at least as much for her overexertion. In a letter to Mitchell, she speaks highly of Stetson, and speculates that her depression stems from her efforts to make “mind and body ... strong and willing servants,” under “constant self supervision and restraint.” Stetson told Mitchell that his wife's breakdown was “the result of a mistake as to one's strength [...] Charlotte, dear girl, strove for self culture, and carried it mentally, physically for five years or more to a perilous extreme.” When an interviewer asked her, in 1901, what her greatest regret was, Gilman alluded to a “too lavish expenditure of nerve force” in her youth, resulting from a “feverish struggle” to discipline her will.³⁴⁷

Gilman never disavowed the project of uplift itself, only the imprudent way she had pursued it. Beneath its logical surface, the “deep spring” of her educational theory is a drive to imagine the conditions under which a young person like herself might have achieved similar results at less psychological cost, to spare future Charlotte Perkins her pain. At the heart of this pain is loneliness; if her goals had been more widely shared, she could have offered and enjoyed mutual support. “Ethics is a social science. Virtue is a social development,” she declares in *Our Brains and What Ails Them*. “Yet [...] we generally believe that goodness is a private affair, and self-development our duty.” It is more efficient, she argues, “to study the conduct of others instead of our own, to try to reform others instead of ourselves [...] just as [...] we can see another person's crooked necktie or unhooked gown more easily than our own.” Although improving one's own mind is good, she continues, there are limits to how much one can do for oneself, especially if one is (as Gilman often was in the genteel poverty of her youth) also straining to make ends meet. “To the masses, too dull, too tired, too piteously harried

346. Gilman, *Women and Economics*, p. 102; Karpinsky, *Critical Essays*, p. 59.

347. Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, pp. 94-95, 254.

and driven by poverty and disease and physical exhaustion to rise to any thought of new brain exercise, we have a larger duty,” she writes. “Any brain able to think at all, able to see what conditions are necessary to right brain growth for all of us, should set itself at once to bring about such conditions. This is the broad, open path of social progress. This involves no self-conscious puttering with our individual brains, but the smooth, full sweep of social action, the rapid development of such laws and such conditions as shall ensure to every child that is born the fullest development of every power.” The education systems in *Herland* and *Moving the Mountain*, as well as those recommended in *Social Ethics*, *Concerning Children*, and elsewhere, are designed to make this “self-conscious puttering” unnecessary.³⁴⁸

What to do, though, before such systems are implemented? Must one push oneself to the breaking point? Gilman dramatizes this problem in her semi-autobiographical 1916 novella *Benigna Machiavelli*, about a young woman who builds her own “conscious system of ethics.” At a young age, Benigna “began to *see* the kind of character I wanted,” like a “sculptor 'see[ing] the statue in the block,” and, sets out to “build” her new self using “the power of one's own will over one's own body, *and* mind.” Like Gilman, Benigna sees life as a complex and engrossing game. The only thing for which she is grateful to her chauvinistic, alcoholic father, she confides, is “that he played checkers and chess so well,” which helped prepare Benigna for “the best game of all [...] the big one – living. As I grew I began to see more and more of it: what fun it was, how wide and endless, and what poor players most people were. They had no plans at all, apparently, and the no idea of rules.” As with Gilman's *Human Game*, the object for Benigna is, in some muddled way, both developing oneself and helping others. As she prepares to leave her parents' home, she makes a Franklinesque chart of her abilities:

Present capacities:

- a. Housekeeping, managing, purchasing.
- b. Cooking, catering, serving.
- c. Sewing, designing, dressmaking.
- d. Stenography and typing.

348. Gilman, “Our Brains,” pp. 330, 333.

Education: ordinary.

Special talents: Self-control, understanding people; knowing how to manage them.

The chart concludes:

Purposes in life:

A. To grow. To be as big as I can – in every sort of way.

B. To use my powers to straighten things as far as I can.

She confesses that her notion of “straighten[ing] things” is “rather misty,” but she knows good works when she does them, so having a clear idea of her ultimate ends is not really necessary. “It isn't the winning that matters,” she explains, “it's the game; it's learning how to play.”³⁴⁹

In practice, Benigna's game consists of benevolent projects; the novella's plot is episodic, jumping from one of these to another, as their scope steadily increases. As a schoolgirl, she solicits donations to replace a watch lost by a kindly teacher, leads a minister to realize that he should donate his beautiful globe to her school, and nudges a wealthy but irritating relative out of her parents' house. She thwarts a man who plans to seduce her older sister under a false promise of marriage. She rids her grandfather of a thieving servant. She arranges for her father to return to his Scottish birthplace to follow up a questionable business tip, and, in his absence, she cajoles her mother into turning their home into a boarding house, which Benigna runs quite profitably by maneuvering her tenants, competitors, and food suppliers like chessmen. In the novella's final chapters, she strikes off for Chicago, where she learns several useful trades, including acting and the art of disguise, in preparation for a vague plan to travel the world and break into the world of the wealthy and powerful, where she can do good on a grander scale. The story breaks off abruptly when Benigna resolves to marry a charismatic cousin whom her father has brought back from Scotland; one gets the sense that he will be tagging along with her. Acknowledging that this conclusion is rather rushed, she remarks that “I see how absurd it is for novelists to try to 'end' a story. There is no end to anybody's story, until they are dead, and some people think that is only the beginning.” For Schiller, the story of *Bildung* can end

349. Gilman, *Benigna Machiavelli*, pp. 47, 48, 59, 154.

when the hero has made his soul a microcosm of the harmonies between reason and passion that characterize the Aesthetic State; that is, when he reaches a certain inner equilibrium. Gilman's idea of self-improvement proceeds in two directions: toward a perfect social consciousness, expressed in specialized social service, which might conceivably be achieved; and toward ever-increasing power and efficiency, an open-ended trajectory which offers no particular resting or stopping points.³⁵⁰

Confusion persists as to whether Benigna is primarily doing good for others, making herself big, or mastering the game that life has set for her. She frequently has trouble distinguishing her own purposes from those of the people she helps. "I can reason it all out, and see that if I am to accomplish what I mean to, I have to have friends," she writes. "Most of all you need to care for people, truly, so as to help them and to make friends. The more friends you have the more powerful you are!" Her affection for her friends and family seems genuine, but is also subsumed by her need to prove to herself how helpful she can be, and to enlarge her own field of action. In Chicago, she meets some settlement workers, "living arbitrarily in certain conditions, and studying them" in order to improve them; Benigna studies with them, "in a way," but her real business, she insists, is not directly helping the poor, but "practicing," learning about the daily life of maids and factory girls because "you cannot know life," that is, "how life *worked*," "if you stay always on one level."³⁵¹

Part of the problem is that Benigna does not feel safe disclosing her real motives, and so reserves a part of herself from (almost all of) her relationships. In literature, she observes, the intelligence and initiative she prizes in herself are stigmatized. "The villains" of her storybooks, she complains, "always went to work with their brains and accomplished something. To be sure they were 'foiled' in the end, but that was by some special interposition of Providence, not by any equal exertion of intellect on the part of the good people. The heroes and middle ones were mostly very stupid. [...] Whatever the

350. Ibid., p. 167.

351. Ibid., pp. 41, 59, 153, 162-63.

villains planned for them to do, they did, like sheep.” “It used to worry me,” she confesses, “as discord worries a musician.” Rejecting conventional notions of good behavior, she resolves to become a “good villain,” helping everybody, but unable to fully trust anybody. Thanks to popular prejudices, “if people think you are a 'schemer,' as they call it, they are suspicious, and it makes it harder” to help them. So she resolves to “do things – wonderful things – without ever being suspected of it.” This commitment to secrecy does cause her some pain. “Being understood. How we do ache for it,” she muses. But if she were understood, she asks, “where would all my plans be?” In one of her exercises in self-discipline, she trains herself to suppress feelings that have no use in the game of life. She makes the rather bizarre choice to relive the day she euthanized a cat until she can recall the experience without feeling sad. Using this skill, she “put my foot on that little desire [to be understood] at once and fell to work trying to understand other people.” Aside from her betrothed, about whom we learn almost nothing (except that “he was just the type of man I liked: tall, sinewy, active but quiet, able to sit still or to jump quick – and far”), Benigna meets only one person whom she can fully confide in and “love without effort”: Rachel Adams, a female preacher modeled quite obviously on Gilman herself. If the culture were more accepting of “good villains,” she might be able to open herself to them.³⁵²

Benigna's predicament explains why Gilman, despite her hostility to the individual personality, would write a *Bildungsroman* at all. When Gilman's educational ideal is realized, there would be no friction in the individual's development into a social actor, and hence no story: the background of Ellador, the most fleshed-out of the Herlanders, is recounted in a single paragraph. In Ourland, on the other hand, individuals must struggle in isolation, toward a goal of ending such struggles in the ideal society to come. Successful *Bildung*, for Gilman, reforms society in ways that socialize the responsibilities that the *Bildungsheld* has worked alone to meet. As it proceeds, too, the self loses its constricting personality, dissolving into an organ of the social whole.

352. Ibid., pp. 41, 59, 153, 162-63.

How is it, though, that Benigna fails to absorb the prevailing prejudice against good villains in the first place? Perhaps, of course, she is simply an extraordinary person. “I was in infant prodigy in common sense,” she boasts; “that’s all.” She does, however, suggest another possibility. Her mother “had studied to be a kindergarten teacher before Father married her,” and although Father “wouldn’t let us go to a kindergarten [...] he couldn’t help mother’s teaching us in the nursery in that wise way, so we really had some advantage of it.” Gilman often praises the kindergarten method, which, unlike the traditional American pedagogy of memorization and drill, encourages children, like good villains, to act on their own initiative, expressing their irrepressible natural interests in everything around them.³⁵³ Like Bobbitt and Snedden, Gilman integrates the kindergarten, whose traditional Froebelian form has a streak of mysticism, into an educational project oriented toward rationality and efficiency. “There is wisdom in youth, and power,” she insists, “if we would but let it grow.” American schools, she argues, have developed “docility, subservience, a quick surrender of purpose, a wavering, untrained, easily shaken judgment.” Rather than forcing the child to accept certain moral precepts, she dreams of an education that will “make the common necessary human virtues clear, easy, natural to the child.” Here again we see that, unlike Ross and Snedden, Gilman regards the socially “necessary virtues” as natural to the individual, rather than needing to be imposed by a benevolent elite. The social change she imagines “does not wait to create new forces,” she writes in *Women and Economics*, “but sets free those already potentially strong, so that humanity will fly up like a released spring. And it is already happening. All we need to do is understand and help.” “Kindergarten methods” are used to gently introduce social reforms in *Moving the Mountain*, and in *Herland*, Van sees kindergarten and Montessori education as the first green shoots of Herland-like wisdom in Ourland.³⁵⁴

353. This, at any rate, is how Gilman sees the kindergarten; for Maria Montessori, on the other hand, its regimen of games, songs, and other activities devised by the teacher still imposes too much on children, who should be left more or less alone with educational playthings.

354. Gilman, *Benigna Machiavelli*, pp. 42, 34; Gilman, *Concerning Children*, pp. 24, 45; Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 80; Gilman, *Women and Economics*, p. 156; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 35, 204.

Another peculiarity of Gilman's version of kindergarten methods is that, while at times she shares the social efficiency educators' distrust of the transfer of training idea and consequent emphasis on specialization, at other times she invokes mental faculties such as the reason and the will. In particular, she believes that recognizing relations of cause and effect is a generalizable skill with which everyone is born, but which traditional education allows to atrophy. "Children are born with a quick curiosity, an eager appetite for whys and wherefores," she writes. "They desire not only to know facts, but relations; to associate cause and effect. They want to know how it is, why it works that way, how to stop it, how to make it go." In education, she argues, "our efforts should be to reduce Cause and Effect to words of one syllable" by providing children with the opportunity to experiment with the world around them. Then, Gilman believes, the capacity for generalization will spring up naturally, "emphasiz[ing] Principles instead of Incidents." Understanding of generalization and cause and effect, in turn, will make it possible to understand the world as an unfolding process in which humans have and can continue to intervene (after the teachings of Ward, perhaps the strongest intellectual influence on Gilman). This idea appears in the educational system of *Moving the Mountain*, where "the whole teaching is dynamic — not static. We used to teach mostly facts, or what we thought were facts. Now we teach processes." When the child's "unsullied soul [is] able to generalize at all," Gilman recommends, "it should be led through pleasant years of unconscious education, in which a new history, taught by story and picture, should show it the upward steps of Baby Humanity." Before branching off into "narrowing lines of personal specialisation" around age fifteen, the curriculum should emphasize chains of causality such as "the story of the building of the earth, the budding of the plant, the birth of the animal, the beautiful unfolding of the human race, from savagery toward civilisation."³⁵⁵

This process-centric education dovetails, for Gilman, with the basic mechanisms of cognition.

355. Gilman, "Our Brains," p. 25; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, p. 82; Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 86; Gilman, *Concerning Children*, p. 147.

“The human creature does not originate nervous energy,” she argues, “but he does secrete it, so to speak, from the impact of natural forces.” The brain, that is, can “receive, retain, and collate impressions,” but it cannot summon images or ideas *ex nihilo*. It is a curator, not a creator. In a well-functioning brain, the “original force” of received impressions is retained “as far as possible, so that the ultimate act, coming from a previous impression, may have the force of the original impulse,” and not be frittered away in distractions. To see a sequence of impressions (causes) through to their logical conclusions (effects) becomes more difficult as the impressions become more subtle, fewer and farther between, more easily lost in the noise of quotidian experience. To separate signal from noise, the brain uses “a storage battery of power we call the will,” with which people can “wor[k] steadily for a desired object, without any present stimulus directed to that end [...] and so acting judiciously from the best impression or group of impressions, instead of indiscriminately from the latest or from any that happens to be uppermost.” “The universe, speaking loudly, lies around every creature,” Gilman writes. “Little by little we learn to hear, to understand, to act accordingly.” The more precisely the child can hear, the more he can distinguish distant causes and effects, the more he will be able to know “the laws about him and to act upon them.”³⁵⁶

When adults compel children to obey us, Gilman warns, “we insert an arbitrary force *between impression and expression*, and stop the latter, leaving the former to push and throb and irritate along the motor nerves and die away unused.” To “cross this normal current of discharge and break the circuit draws on nervous energy,” she writes. “It excites. It tires.” Although teachers may direct children's learning by presenting them with various stimuli, and, under certain circumstances, posing problems for advanced pupils to undertake voluntarily, they should never make the child feel that she must do something simply because an adult says so. “Unconscious growth is best,” writes the woman who spent her childhood grappling with “the fearful figure of Duty”; “and the desired improvement during this

356. Gilman, *Concerning Children*, pp. 47-48, 53-54.

period should be made by the skilful educator without the child's knowledge.” Educators should strive to give children the experience of young Herlanders, who “grew up as naturally as young trees; learning through every sense; taught continuously but unconsciously – never knowing they were being educated.” Freed from anxiety over obeying adults, they can pay closer attention to their environment and its natural laws.³⁵⁷

These laws, ultimately, link the individual with the larger cosmic processes that define the rules of the Human Game. “A Force, which we know, because we can see, feel, and use it, has set this world going, and brought it thus far,” Gilman writes in *Social Ethics*. This Force expresses itself in a relatively crude way in the laws governing inorganic matter, and in a more complex and powerful way in living things. Humanity, too, is “a Thing in Motion, a Process of Development.” Unlike other creatures, however, Gilman writes (again echoing Ward's theory of telic evolution), “we, alone, as far as we know, have this vast field of Consciousness that can envisage Life – think about it, and so act as to change it.” Until we perfect the use of consciousness, “our progress is upward and presumably toward still higher efforts and satisfactions.” In *Moving the Mountain*, a Professor of Ethics restates this cosmology in more explicitly religious terms:

The business of the universe about us consists in the Transmission of Energy. Some of it is temporarily and partially arrested in material compositions; some is more actively expressed in vegetable and animal form; this stage of expression we call Life. We ourselves, the human animals, were specially adapted for high efficiency in storing and transmitting this energy; and so were able to enter into a combination still more efficient; that is, into social relations. Humanity, man in social relation, is the best expression of the Energy that we know. This Energy is what the human mind has been conscious of ever since it was conscious at all; and calls God. The relation between this God and this Humanity is in reality a very simple one. In common with all other life forms, the human being must express itself in normal functioning. Because of its special faculty of consciousness, this human engine can feel, see, think, about the power within it; and can use it more fully and wisely. All it has to learn is the right expression of its degree of life-force, of Social Energy.

Perceiving cause and effect, developing the “power of connected action,” become not just what we might call “critical thinking skills,” but a kind of religious praxis. Gilman does not, however, want to make one's mental efficiency a reflection of one's salvation: something like that is what drove her, in

her words from “Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wall-Paper,’” “so near the borderline of utter mental ruin
357. Gilman, “Our Brains,” pp. 276-77; Gilman, *Concerning Children*, p. 17; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, p. 195.

that I could see over.” Instead, she makes human conduct a question of the realization of Social Energy, in which the individual is not, properly speaking, an autonomous ethical actor. In Herland, accordingly, “shortcomings and misdeeds in childhood never were presented to [children] as sins; merely as errors and misplays – as in a game. Some of them, who were palpably less agreeable than others or who had a real weakness or fault, were treated with cheerful allowance, as a friendly group at whist would treat a poor player.” Since the poor players feel no shame, there is also no reason for the exceptionally good players to keep their skills secret. In Herland, that is, Benigna could afford to be understood.³⁵⁸

The ethical ideals in which Gilman's education culminates are, despite their grounding in each individual's cognitive functions, distinctly impersonal. “Where we find any process going on, with observable sequence of cause and effect, we can instantly call its regular fulfillment 'right' and any error or failure 'wrong,’” she writes. Thus a crystal, for instance, might be described as “good” or “bad” depending on how well it exhibits the general properties of crystals; “we are studying ethics, a science,” after all. Since right and wrong are so thoroughly objective, so indifferent to considerations of perspective, Gilman sees nothing amiss about those who know more about ethics guiding those who know less using all manner of what Ross calls “subtle Jesuitry,” so long as they do not “insert an arbitrary force *between impression and expression*” by explicitly demanding obedience. When teaching good behavior to the young, for instance, “the standard of measurement” is “not what the child wishes [...] but what is really beneficial to the child.” She carries this principle into her political activism and her utopian imagination as well. She argues that women should have the vote because the resulting immersion in social life is certain to improve their character; thus, she reasons, they should get it whether or not the majority of them “know enough to want it.” Gilman is aware that such tactics might rub people the wrong way, but assumes that they will thank her later. In *Moving the Mountain*, for instance, the gradual encroachment of cooperative arrangements such as the Social Service Union,

358. Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 123; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 98, 200.

while agreeable, give the protagonist “a creepy feeling, as of one slowly surmounted by a rising tide”; but, after trying and failing to think of anything wrong with the new way of doing things, he shrugs off his discomfort.³⁵⁹

Gilman's ideal education system is accordingly quite technocratic. In *Moving the Mountain*, standards of “efficient motherhood,” systematized as the “new science of Humaniculture,” are regulated by a federal “Department of Child Culture,” and adult education is handled by a “Commission on Human Efficiency.” New York City's preschools are centrally administered under a single office, whose occupant has “as big a place as being head of Harvard College.” (Boards of education, on the other hand, are never mentioned.) For the present, she recommends, in *Social Ethics*, a “College or Commission of Social Ethics, selected from the best and wisest,” “bas[ing] its labors on Biology and Sociology,” to “prepare, for the use of schools and churches, certain plain and unquestioned records of fact” that will help clarify the following questions, all of which she regards as straightforwardly empirical:

- a. What is social life?
- b. What is social progress?
- c. On what conditions does social progress rest?
- d. By what conduct is social progress most advanced, and most impeded?
- e. By what definite personal action may we soonest produce the desired conduct?

Of course, Gilman concedes, “it is neither possible nor desirable that any one school of ethicists should formulate and force upon the world a given set of views.” The general proof of the “need of a scientific ethics based on the facts of social progress,” however, together with scientific accounts of “how our personal conduct is related to that progress,” should be matters of common agreement.³⁶⁰

So far we have focused on Gilman's theory of education; what does her education look like in practice? As we see in the comparison between Herland and Snedden's province of Zond, the setting itself is a major element of Gilman's (hypothetical) educational praxis. The ideal setting will be one in

359. Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 3; Gilman, *Concerning Children*, p. 195; Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, p. 192; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, p. 61.

360. Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 44, 52; Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 114.

which the distinction between school and society will weaken or even collapse altogether. We can now add the ideal of unconscious education to this idea, and say that the distinction to be collapsed is one between places where children are aware of their supervision and places where they are not; they will always be somewhat supervised, but never feel wholly so. “More and more to-day is the school opening out,” Gilman writes. “It connects with the public library, with art and industry, with the open fields; and this will go on till the time is reached when the child does not know that he is at school, — he is always there, and yet never knows it.” The Long Island “Reception Room” of *Moving the Mountain*, which has schools, but “you won’t know when you do see them,” because properly speaking the whole island is a school, exemplifies this idea. So too do the “baby-gardens” (pedagogical day-care centers) that Gilman imagines placing on the roofs of apartment buildings. She calls for “special nurses who knew their business” to oversee the baby-gardens, but says almost nothing about their role as teachers, and quite a bit about the educational effects of the environment itself:

A room really designed for babies to play in need have no “furniture” save a padded seat along the wall for the “grown-ups” to sit on, a seat with little ropes along the edge for the toddlers to pull up and walk by. The floor should be smooth and even, antiseptically clean, and not hard enough to bump severely. A baby must fall, but we need not provide cobblestones for his first attempts. Large soft ropes, running across here and there, within reach of the eager, strong little hands, would strengthen arms and chest, and help in walking. A shallow pool of water, heated to suitable temperature, with the careful trainer always at hand, would delight, occupy, and educate for daily hours. A place of clean, warm sand, another of clay, with a few simple tools, — these four things — water, sand, clay, and ropes to climb on — would fill the days of happy little children without further “toys.”

“For babies, better education” means, “mainly, a far quieter and more peaceful life” in which the all-important “impressions” (as we have seen, the raw material of all consciousness), are “planned and maintained with an intelligent appreciation of [their] mental powers.” In *Concerning Children*, she imagines the sequel to the baby-garden: a vast urban park, “clean and bright and full of wide spaces of grass and trees,” designed specifically for the free-range education of children. For a chapter, we follow an energetic boy as he visits a museum (where a curator shows him different insects but changes the subject at the first sign of “inattention and weariness”), an archery range, and a garden of anthropological dioramas. “There were many parks in the city,” we learn, “with different buildings and

departments; and in them, day by day, without ever knowing it, the children of that city 'went to school.' This ideal city takes its place in a series of educational environments, of increasing scale, that Gilman imagines over the course of her career, from the rooftop for babies, to the park for children, to the "Reception Room" for immigrants, to the self-contained nation of Herland, where "the children in this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts [...] every step of our advance is always considered in its effect on them – on the race."³⁶¹

Social Efficiency Education and Art: Windows and Lenses

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to the role of art in social efficiency education, and in Gilman's thought. Many Progressive Era educators turn to the aesthetic to finesse, in various ways, the problem of how to shape people's minds without violating their autonomy. Art's power to change the self is viewed, at times, as non-coercive; if education is itself a kind of aesthetic experience rather than the transfer of potentially controversial ideas, then it cannot be interpreted as a power grab. At other times, an education that can produce artists is argued to be incapable of unjustifiably restricting individual potential. Or, aesthetic experience is held to reflect objective facts about human nature which in turn justify programs of subject-formation. For the Herbartians, the formal harmonies that characterize are structurally identical to those that characterize the apperceptive masses of the educated mind and the cultural networks of the civilized society. For Montessori, art channels humanity's God-given nature, and demonstrates the validity of Montessori's own theory of education as channeling rather than upbuilding. For Dewey, art is a paradigmatic version of "*an* experience," and thus a lodestar for a pedagogy and politics based on the integrity of experience.

In contrast to these thinkers, the social efficiency educators neither orient their education toward

361. Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 44, 52; Gilman, *Social Ethics*, p. 114.

the production of aesthetic experience, nor do they take that experience as a regulatory ideal. They do not see the aesthetic itself as a value-laden category, much less as a guiding light. In the National Education Association's highly influential *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* report of 1918, coauthored by Snedden's protege Charles Prosser, art appears almost as a foreign body lodged in the curriculum. While most of the report's recommendations can be linked to social efficiency in a fairly straightforward way, education in the appreciation of "literature, art, and music" aims only at "emotional response" and "enjoyment." The report hints at art having a secondary social purpose in that "recreational activities" such as "pageants" and "festivals" can "contribute simultaneously to other ends of education," presumably by giving substantive learning a patina of fun. This, at any rate, is how Ross wishes to see art used. Like several of the social efficiency educators, he criticizes artists who, "resenting the yoke of morality, have coined the absurd phrase 'art for art's sake.'" "What madness," he exclaims, "when we are all the time besetting the individual with our theologies and religions and ideals, and can scarcely keep him in order at that, to let the irresponsible artist get at him and undo our work!" Art, he believes, can influence behavior in the interests of social control by "kindl[ing] sympathy" for people whom it represents, by generating "passion" and "excitement" for group efforts, by associating desirable behaviors with the beautiful ("while some men naturally abominate selfishness, all men abominate filth [...] by art it is possible so to link together the two that the loathing for defilement shall extend to bad conduct") or the sublime ("the artist is able to impress with the triviality of life and the insignificance of the individual lot" compared with the vastness of the social undertaking), and in various other ways. Snedden, too, insists that "few of us who deal much with children have any patience with the cry 'art for art's sake.' We cannot make literature an end in itself." "Character, personal effectiveness, social effectiveness – these are the results we want from education," he goes on; "we use literature because we want these sensibilities stimulated." Anything that can promote these sensibilities, for Snedden, belongs in the humanities curriculum. He anticipates that the

age of classical literature and philosophy is closing, and a new one of social science, travel writing, geography, and documentary films is dawning, and he does not regret the coming eclipse of aesthetic masterpieces.³⁶²

For Bobbitt, as we have seen, the pro-social attitudes converge toward the ideal of large-group consciousness, which is best promoted by providing a breadth of experiences rather than through dogmatic precepts. The arts, he believes, can provide these experiences where first-hand exposure is impossible. He recommends a reading program that moves the student through space, via such genres as “travels, geography, ethnology, descriptive sociology,” and “anthropology”; through time, via “biography, travels (during past ages), history, memoirs,” and “evolutionary sociology”; and into hard-to-see subtleties, via “science readings, mathematical, physical, biological, sociological, [and] technological” texts. “‘Literature,’ in the narrower sense,” Bobbitt argues, “appears simply to be the adequate presentation” of any of these topics. It can “reconstruct life so that it can be visualized, and relived in imagination.” It “reconstructs the distant past with the same ease and clearness as the past of but an hour ago; action on the other side of the earth, as easily as that on the next street.”³⁶³

In short, for Bobbitt, writing is literature when “it presents a clear window through which one can look out upon existence.” Accordingly, he discourages calling students' attention to aesthetic technique, to the artificiality of the text. “Reading should be [...] an illusion of human life,” he argues; “All that the spectator wants is illusion.” When watching a play, for instance, a “man need know nothing about the various devices that were employed by the playwright in producing the effects. As a matter of fact, the more he knows about the technique of securing effects and the more he sees the stage machinery, the less is the play a real illusion of life. It becomes but a tissue of technical devices. [...] In

362. Ross, *Social Control*, pp. 256-64; *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, A Report of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education*. Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1918; Snedden, “Literature in the Grades,” p. 784.

363. Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, pp. 230-39, 134.

the same way, an undue consciousness on the part of the reader as to technical literary machinery not only does not further the fundamental purposes of the reading, but may actually hinder.” Snedden, too, affirms that “content rather than form” is what makes literature educationally valuable, and that trying to make students “conscious of bad form” or good form is not worthwhile. It would be like taking a field trip on a glass bottomed boat and talking about the glass instead of the fish.³⁶⁴

Gilman's views about art are more complex than those of the other social efficiency educators.

As we explore them, this 1911 poem will be our touchstone:

“The Artist”

Here one of us is born, made as a lens,
Or else to lens-shape cruelly smooth-ground,
To gather light, the light that shines on all,
In concentrated flame it glows, pure fire,
With light a hundredfold, more light for all.

Come and receive, take with the eye or ear,
Take and be filled, illumined, overflowed;
Then go and shine again, your whole work lit,
Your whole heart warm and luminous and glad;
Go shine again – and spread the gladness wide;

Happy the lens! To gather skies of light
And focus it, making the splendor there!
Happy all we who are enriched therewith,
And redistribute ever, swift and far.

The artist is the intermediate lens
Of God, and so best gives Him to the world,
Intensified, interpreted, to us.

As we have seen, in Gilman's religious anthropology, humanity is “the best expression” of the divine “Energy” that we know, and the ultimate goal of education is to make people fitting vessels for this cosmic force. As with the lens imagery in “The Artist,” she describes this goal in terms of transparency. Individual capacities will, of course, “vary indefinitely,” but under “a subtle system of real education,” she writes, while one mental “establishment might be smaller than another [...] each could have the bright clear feelin[g] of washed windows.” A mind like a clear pane of glass, however, is not enough.

The mind must direct and concentrate the light; the artist is a lens, not a window. “The early life forms
364. Bobbitt, *Curriculum*, p. 239; Snedden, “Literature in the Grades,” p. 784.

received power and transmitted it instantly,” Gilman writes, “as a pane of glass transmits light, acting only from immediate stimulus. With later growth they acquired the power of retaining impressions; of checking expression; of managing a steadier current of conduct.” For Gilman this power to deliberately manage the current of conduct (again, echoing Ward's account of “conation”) allows individuals to coordinate among each other and produce the social mind, which is a still more transparent medium for the cosmic energy. Individuals become “the assembled instruments through which, when properly attuned, the symphony may be heard.”³⁶⁵ (Recall *Moving the Mountain's* Professor of Ethics: “We ourselves, the human animals, were specially adapted for high efficiency in storing and transmitting this energy; and so were able to enter into a combination still more efficient; that is, into social relations.”)

The artist plays a special role in the process by which humanity channels, focuses, or, in the terms of “The Artist,” “gathers light, the light that shines on all.” While Gilman expects everybody to “manag[e] a steadier current” than a merely reactive animal, the artist takes in a wider range of impressions, whole “skies of light,” and translates them into a “concentrated flame” that can be perceived by the average person. As she puts it in *Our Brains and What Ails Them*, “When the mind, specially sensitized to see and understand some part of life, began to use this fluent power to revisualize and interpret that life to others, a great art was born. To feel and see some vital phase of human life; to throw that feeling, that perception, into such forms as to be easily assimilable to others – that is the art of fiction. [...] It translates the general into the particular and presents it to other minds; which, impressed by the particular instance, can re-generalize again in its own brain.”³⁶⁶

The artist, then, presents a limit case of the identification of specialization with both individuality and social service. (In fact, the lens-grinding imagery of “The Artist” also figures, in *Our Brains and*

365. Gilman and Knight, *Herland, The Yellow Wall-paper, and Selected Writings*, p. 340; Gilman, “Our Brains,” pp. 49-51.

366. Gilman, “Our Brains,” p. 138.

What Ails Them, for specialization and the service ethos: “If, for instance, a man's service to the world is grinding lenses, an operation in itself not developing to the brain, he should on the one hand have an extended culture, and on the other he should be recognized, not as one grinding lenses for a living, but as one by whose aid we study the stars.”) More so than other specialists, the artist's work depends on her unique perspective, but is valuable for its power to build a social consciousness that transcends the private vision. Because individuality and social service are equally essential to true art, Gilman must differentiate her position from both the pure subjectivism that she associates with art for art's sake and the finger-wagging moralism implied by an exclusive emphasis social service. “It is in recognition” of the centrality of his own “special development” to his work, writes Gilman, “that the artist gets his theory of self-fulfillment”: “To thine own self be true,/ And it shall follow as the day the night/ That thou canst not be false to any man.” This maxim, however, mistakes the artist for a window, like “the early life forms,” rather than a human lens capable of deliberately shaping and focusing its reactions. “If our social growth were as unconscious as the accretion of a coral island,” she concedes, “to thine own self be true [...] would be enough. But in our stage of organic interrelation, it is not always a safe guide.” Although “there may be no 'morals' in literature,” in the sense of fixed commandments and prohibitions which one must obey, “Ethics there is.”³⁶⁷

For Gilman, as we know, ethics is a science, and is advanced by increasing understanding of facts and laws. She therefore expects art to bring such empirical matters to the public's attention; she praises Dickens and Stowe, for instance, for their exposé novels. As with all pedagogy, then, she recommends kindergarten methods in the arts, since these are the best way to transfer knowledge regardless of age or medium. In the literature of Herland, for instance, Van is “most struck, at first, by the child-motive,” the “gradation of simple repetitive verse and story” up through “the most exquisite, imaginative tales.” Not only to their “great artists” make “simple and unfailing in appeal to the

367. Ibid., pp. 78, 137-38.

child-mind,” but their work is rigorously “*true*, true to the living world about them.” In *Moving the Mountain*, too, we learn that “we wish to have the first impressions in our children's minds, above all things, true.” Certainly, “all the witchery and loveliness possible in presentation” should be employed, but reality should never be distorted.³⁶⁸

One might wonder, then, why Gilman writes science fiction rather than the investigative realism she praises in other novelists. The reason can be inferred, perhaps, from another feature of the literature in *Moving the Mountain*: in addition to “real events,” it portrays “natural laws and processes.” Whereas the literature of the 1900s was, according to that novel, fixated on the past (the only thing visible to a window-pane empiricism), that of 1940 is full of “stories of the future,” and “leaves the child with a sense that things are going to happen – and he, or she, can help.” In other words, it reinforces the human capacity to extend sequences of cause and effect into the future, and thereby trains that faculty, as well as reinforcing the sense of individual initiative. “One of the most distinctive features of the human mind is to forecast better things,” Gilman writes in the preface to *Moving the Mountain*. “This natural tendency to hope, desire, foresee and then, if possible, obtain” has been diverted into dreams of the afterlife or far-fetched utopias set in a future too remote to contemplate, but this novel, she promises, simply expounds “existing possibilities. It indicates what people might do, real people, now living, in thirty years — if they would.” Possibilities as well as facts, or perhaps better stated the fact of human possibilities, make up the light that the artist focuses.³⁶⁹

As the artist, “God's intermediate lens,” shepherds her audience gradually upward along the path of human progress, the knowledge differential between producer and consumer shrinks. This feature of Gilman's vision can, like much of her educational thought, be seen as a further working-through of the trauma of her youthful overexertion. The public shares in the artist's vision, and she becomes

368. Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 201, 84.

369. *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 5.

comparatively less isolated in her heroic specialization. In *Moving the Mountain*, the protagonist is impressed by the “beautiful commonness of good architecture, good sculpture, good painting, good drama, good dancing, good literature.” In *Concerning Children*, Gilman laments that “the most advanced of us” are “hampered” and “weighted down” by the “defects and limitations” of the “lowest classes of society,” the “great rear-guard of the population.” Though it might be tempting to cut oneself off from these burdensome masses, Gilman knows too well the price of going it alone. “We must wait,” she counsels, because the good society “is alive, and includes all its members.” “World knowledge in world-wide use is what we need, not 'scholars',” she advises in *Our Brains and What Ails Them*; “a universal ability to learn to reason and act, not a few philosophers and a race of helots.” *Moving the Mountain* inverts these fears. As the culture becomes more enlightened, “instead of those perpendicular peaks of isolated genius we used to have, surrounded by the ignorantly indifferent many, and the excessively admiring few, those geniuses now sloped gently down to the average on long graduated lines of decreasing ability. It gave to the commonest people a possible road of upward development, and to the most developed a path of connection with the commonest people. The geniuses seemed to like it too. They were not so conceited, not so disagreeable, not so lonesome.”³⁷⁰

As the perpendicular peaks of art level off into the plateau of a broadly elevated culture, art starts to become not only widely intelligible, but indistinguishable from everyday life. In *Moving the Mountain*, “the great word Art was no longer so closely confined to its pictorial form,” but rather released into “the atmosphere in which all children grew, all people lived.” The fruit of the artist's specialized labor, i.e., cultural progress, the growth of social consciousness, ultimately works against the dynamic of exclusive specialization itself, and toward a world in which people can engage with art in a moderate way, perhaps working at it two hours a week, like everybody in *Moving the Mountain*, or perhaps pursuing it avocationally, “to grow with,” like the Herlanders. Gilman represents the

370. Gilman, *Concerning Children*, p. 296; Gilman, “Our Brains,” p. 302; Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, p. 92.

culmination of this process in the festivals of Herland, where all types of people and varieties of cultural activity are harmoniously interwoven:

There was a most impressive array of pageantry, of processions, a sort of grand ritual, with their arts and their religion broadly blended. The very babies joined in it. To see one of their great annual festivals, with the massed and marching stateliness of those great mothers, the young women brave and noble, beautiful and strong; and then the children, taking part as naturally as ours would frolic round a Christmas tree -- it was overpowering in the impression of joyous, triumphant life. They had begun at a period when the drama, the dance, music, religion, and education were all very close together; and instead of developing them in detached lines, they had kept the connection.

The Herland pageant, not the “Woman-at-Large” of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” is Gilman's image of sanity. Yet this sanity demands a level of consensus about scientific and ethical truth that is incompatible with cultural or religious pluralism, and with pragmatic humility about humanity's access to final truths. These expectations helped Gilman climb back from the brink of “utter mental ruin,” but they are, at the least, a little eccentric.³⁷¹

371. Gilman, *Herland Trilogy*, pp. 91, 198.

John Dewey's Aesthetic Education: Living Has Its Own Intrinsic Quality

This chapter presents John Dewey's views on the interrelationships among personal life, social life, school matters, and the aesthetic. It takes the form of a compressed *tour d'horizon* of Dewey's thinking about the basic features of experience in these four areas. With regard to the first three areas, the focus will be on understanding what Dewey means when he says that “living has its own intrinsic quality and the business of education is with that quality.” Aesthetic experience, in turn, will be shown to have a special relationship with this quality, which it illuminates, exemplifies, and communicates. The *Bildung* idea toward which this view of Dewey's aesthetics points is, uniquely among those considered in this study, compatible with a truly democratic ideal of social action, even as it recognizes an important role for an autonomous educational profession.

The educational world of Horace Mann and the common school movement was both pre-professional and, from the perspective of the Progressive Era, pre-scientific. It was pre-professional in the sense that teachers were not expected to have special qualifications, and that administration was handled by local democratic bodies such as town or ward councils, rather than by trained superintendents. It was pre-scientific in the sense that its animating ideas, such as faculty psychology and mental discipline, were products of a pre-disciplinary era in which the fact-value distinction was not firmly established, and there were no clear lines between natural philosophy and moral philosophy. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the Progressive Era saw a transfer of power from directly elected boards to (supposedly) impartial appointed bureaucrats, and from laypeople to those trained in the emerging institution of the university-controlled education school. To justify this abridgement of democracy, many leading educators cast themselves as scientific experts acting on known facts and laws; that is, they invoked a science of education. Different educational movements imagined the

science of education differently. For the Herbartians, the mind was a network of interconnected nodes which sought to attain certain geometrical (often, in their metaphors, architectural) properties of symmetry and balance. These mathematical properties also described ideal social and aesthetic forms. For Montessori and her followers (and for G. Stanley Hall and his), the science of education was biology, and the teacher was the handmaid to a process of unfolding from within whose contours had been set by human evolution. For social efficiency educators such as David Snedden and Franklin Bobbitt, while biology also played a strong role, the queen of the educational sciences was sociology, which determined the school system's goals in the areas of vocational training, cognitive skill building, and character formation.

Unlike these figures, Dewey questions both the elevation of educational administration above democratic influence and the claims to scientific authority with which this elevation was justified. At the same time, however, he does not want to return to the old arrangements, in which there was no body of educational expertise to counterbalance, politically and intellectually, the will of the majority. As a pragmatist, he believes that education is a transformation of and within human experience, and can only be adequately understood through a theory of experience; that is, through a philosophy rather than a science. Certain aspects of experience, he holds, can be scientifically described, but the whole of any experience can only be grasped with the imagination. Furthermore, both science and philosophy have to leave themselves open to revision based on the actual experiences of teachers and students, which always, according to his own theories, will contain novel, untheorized elements. ("If what is written in these pages has no other result than creating and promoting a respect for concrete human experience and its potentialities," Dewey writes in *Experience and Nature*, "I shall be content.")³⁷²

372. Dewey, John. *Experience and Nature*. New York: Dover, 1958 (1929), p. 39.

The Autonomy of Education

Aside from fellow pragmatists such as Jane Addams and George Herbert Mead, almost all of Dewey's educational predecessors and contemporaries based their pedagogy on a static picture of human nature. Schiller divided the mind into form, sense, and play drives, and neo-Kantians such as Nicholas Murray Butler adopted similar schemata; Mann, influenced by phrenology and the Scottish Common Sense philosophers, recognized a large but finite number of faculties which could be grouped, in descending order, as rational, passionate, and automatic; Hegelians such as William Torrey Harris saw the mind as a unity rather than a group of faculties, but identified that unity with the operation of a particular mental function, reason; G. Stanley Hall based his model curricula on an inventory of needs and powers etched into the mind by evolution (although he admitted that this inventory was, as yet, incompletely understood); Montessori expressed a similar idea with her hormic nebulae; the Herbartians were agnostic about the basic elements of the mind, but dogmatic about the single law by which they were combined. Social efficiency educators such as Snedden conspicuously lacked a distinctive scientific psychology; instead, they derived their educational policies from scientific sociology, while conceding that psychology pointed out better and worse ways to deliver students to their social destiny.³⁷³

Unlike these figures, Dewey holds that “it is unscientific” to try to identify “a definite number of sharply demarcated classes of instincts” or faculties. Rather, he insists, people process stimuli and perform other mental functions in a flexible way, guided by their ever-changing and often novel felt needs. “The indefinite multitude of particular and changing events is met by the mind with acts of defining, inventorying and listing, reducing to common heads and tying up in bunches,” he concedes, but “these acts like other intelligent acts are performed for a purpose, and the accomplishment of

373. See the chapter “The New Basis of Method” in Snedden's *Problems of Educational Readjustment*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913, pp. 33-64.

purpose is their only justification.” New needs and purposes will produce new forms of response, which might come to be labeled, by the taxonomically inclined, as new instincts or faculties. Such labels, however, obscure as much as they reveal, since “every reaction takes place in a different environment, and its meaning is never twice alike.” There is no “single, identical psychic force which ‘causes’ all the reactions of fear,” for instance; rather, “cowardice, embarrassment, caution and reverence may all be regarded as forms of fear. They all have certain physical organic acts in common: those of organic shrinkage, gestures of hesitation and retreat. But each is qualitatively unique. Each is what it is in virtue of its total interactions or correlations with [...] the environing medium.”³⁷⁴

Because the environment that shapes the mind is itself largely a product of human intentions – that is, is largely cultural – it has the same shapeshifting quality as the mind itself, and the interaction between mind and environment becomes vertiginously difficult to predict. “While certain needs in human nature are constant,” he allows, “the consequences they produce (because of the existing state of culture – of science, morals, religion, art, industry, legal rules) react back into the original components of human nature to shape them into new forms,” and “the total pattern is thereby modified.” No amount of laboratory psychology or psychoanalytic theory, no “opinions about the inherent make-up of human nature,” can address “the fundamental question of how its constituents are stimulated and inhibited, intensified and weakened; how their pattern is determined by interaction with cultural conditions.” Not only are theories of a fixed human nature doomed to oversimplify, but, because of their blindness to culture, they can neither explain “the differences that mark off one tribe, family, people, from another” nor advise that one “state of society” is better or worse than another. When they are brought to bear on essentially cultural matters such as education, they always commit some intellectual sleight of hand, inevitably, if sometimes unintentionally, in the interests of the powerful. Despite his objections to such theories, Dewey acknowledges that social action does require that one “take fundamental account of

374. Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 2002 (1922), pp. 131, 155.

human nature”; but one must account not for its fixity, but for its flexibility. “We need to examine every one of the phases of human activity to ascertain what effects it has in release, maturing and fruition of the potentialities of human nature,” he argues, even though we will never have a full inventory of those potentialities. This dictum is especially applicable to education, which is, for Dewey, the social action par excellence.³⁷⁵

Aside from the general limitations of the human sciences, Dewey also argues for the autonomy of education on the grounds that it is an applied art, and not a kind of science. Education happens in specific, uncontrolled, novel situations, where considerations are bound to arise that science has not foreseen. It is “an art that progressively incorporates more and more of science into itself,” drawing on many different scientific fields. There is, for Dewey, no one science or group of sciences that have inherent educational relevance. Rather, science becomes educational science when it is actually used to improve education. “Results may be scientific, short of their operative presence in the attitudes and habits of observation, judgment and planning of those engaged in the educative act,” he writes in *The Sources of a Science of Education*. “But they are not educational science short of this point. They are psychology, sociology, statistics, or whatever.” As with Theodore Roosevelt's “man in the arena,” it is the person in the classroom who counts. For that person, scientific “results are sources to be used,” according to the dictates of practical wisdom, “to make educational functions more intelligent.” Just as a physicist would not necessarily make a competent engineer, despite knowing all the scientific principles that inform the art of engineering, educators must resist looking to psychologists, sociologists, and other scientists for “rule[s] which [are] to be uniformly adopted.” To accept such rules would be “destructive of the free play of education as an art,” effacing the particularities of personality, social environment, and curriculum whose harmonization is the teacher's chief task. It would also be a blow to the educational profession, since if science could lay down specific rules, it would not take a

375. Dewey, John. *Freedom and Culture*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989 (1939), pp. 88-89, 26, 96, 98.

highly trained or experienced person to follow them.³⁷⁶

Education's relation to science, where facts are concerned, is mirrored, in Dewey's thought, by its relation to philosophy, where ends and values are concerned. Only "concrete educational experience" can "determine educational ends"; it "sets the problems, and tests, modifies, confirms or refutes the conclusions" of any "intellectual investigation" into education, whether scientific or philosophical. Although educators are closest to this experience, even they do not quite have the final say in determining educational ends and values. Rather, the process of education itself has a life of its own, and all who engage in it, including teachers and students, must prepare to be changed by it in fundamental ways. "Education is itself a process of discovering what values are worth while," in which various activities are allowed to influence a developing human life. Some of these activities will lead to more "growth" than others (a concept to be discussed in the next section). These consequences, in turn, determine the value of these activities (and of the manner in which they were presented), and suggest avenues of improvement in curriculum, pedagogy, and administration. This process "is by its nature an endless circle or spiral. [...] In its very process [education] sets more problems to be further studied, which then react into the educative process to change it still further, and thus demand more thought, more science, and so on, in everlasting sequence." In education "there is no such thing as a fixed and final set of objectives, even for the time being or temporarily. [...] there is no way to discover what is 'more truly educational' except by the continuation of the educational act itself. The discovery is never made; it is always making." What philosophy offers to those participating in this endless discovery is merely a degree of patience and disinterest. While, "like worker[s] in any field," educators are liable to become "preoccupied with more immediate urgencies and results," lost in the day to day demands of teaching, philosophers can, from the leisure of their armchairs, "consider obscure collateral consequences that show themselves in a more extensive time-span" and examine the actual

376. Dewey, John. *The Sources of a Science of Education*,. New York: H. Liveright, 1929, pp. 13-14, 32.

accomplishments of education “in the light of a general scheme of values.” As with science, though, the findings of philosophy only become properly educational when they actually “enabl[e] practitioners to carry on their work in a more liberal spirit, with escape from tradition and routine and one-sided personal interests and whims.” “The proof of the pudding,” as Dewey puts it, “is in the eating. The philosophy of education not only draws its original material as to ends and value from actual experience in education, but it goes back to these experiences for testing, confirmation, modification, and the provision of further materials.”³⁷⁷

Education as Growth

In a frequently quoted passage from *Democracy and Education*, Dewey pithily sums up his argument for the autonomy of education: “the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end,” he writes, and is characterized by “continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming.” In this passage, however, he also goes on to assert, a bit cryptically, that “living has its own intrinsic quality and that the business of education is with that quality.” He might have said, if he wished to make the connection to his broader philosophical system clearer, that “*experience* has its own intrinsic quality.” Dewey begins to delineate the distinctive features of experience in his landmark 1896 paper, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” in which he suggests that the dominant picture of experience in laboratory psychology, the stimulus/response model, needs to be revised. His insight in “Reflex Arc” is that, in the interaction between a person and her environment, there is no way to cleanly separate stimulus and response. The environment is full of an indefinite variety of phenomena, of which a person can focus on only a few. Thus perception cannot be a neutral receptivity, but must be an act of mental ordering. This ordering, according to the stimulus/response model, is itself categorized as a kind

377. Ibid., pp. 57-58, 74-76.

of “response” to the environment, and is inevitably based on some prior stimulus. (For instance, someone who once had a bad reaction to a bee sting might, in the future, be more attentive to insects than the average person.) Rather than distinct phases of stimulus and response, then, Dewey sees one unbroken “organic circuit” linking organism and environment. “Sensory stimulus, central connections and motor responses [should] be viewed,” he writes, “not as separate and complete entities in themselves, but as divisions of labor, functioning factors, within the single concrete whole.” This single whole, which he elsewhere calls “the true ‘stuff’ of experience,” consists, in biological terms, of “sensori-motor coordinations,” in psychological terms of “habits” or “adaptive courses of action,” and in broadly philosophical terms of “connections of doing and undergoing.”³⁷⁸

However it is conceived, the experience of any “live creature” involves a process of adjustment to the environment, which must have “reference to its surroundings and to what goes before and what comes after.” Simply to keep existing, it must seek certain things in the environment and avoid others. “Life,” he writes, “consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it.” The more complex the organism (and this includes different degrees of complexity among human minds), the more elaborate become its needs and aversions. Conversely, as the organism refines its habits in response to challenging situations, rendering certain problems easy or even trivial (as, say, reading English becomes trivial after a certain amount of practice), it encounters new challenges that demand more complex adjustments between it and its environment. Dewey’s term for this process, in which “a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives,” is “growth.” “In a growing life,” he writes, “the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed.”

378. Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004 (1915), p. 36; Dewey, John. “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology.” *Psychological Review* 3 (1896), 357-370; Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008 (1920), p. 91.

“Growth,” for Dewey, is synonymous with both the goal and the method of education. In this section we will briefly survey the concept of growth, in preparation for a more sustained look at the phases of Deweyan experience and their educational and aesthetic implications.³⁷⁹

Since experience is a relation between organism and environment, and not located strictly within the organism, one way to think about growth is as an expansion of a “continuous system of connected events,” which includes both the mental events within the live creature and the events of the “world in which it is at home.” Growth is, therefore, in “contrast with the ideas both of unfolding of latent powers from within, and of the formation from without, whether by physical nature or by the cultural products of the past.” It is, rather, “a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience,” a process over which both individuals and society can exert influence, but which neither can ever totally control. Yet, despite the fact that no agent can unilaterally cause growth to occur, growth is natural for creatures with memory and foresight, which are themselves integral to the human sensorimotor circuit: “We use our past experiences to construct new and better ones in the future. The very fact of experience thus includes the process by which it directs itself in its own betterment.” To encourage growth, therefore, one must immerse oneself in “the very fact of experience.”³⁸⁰

Nonetheless, not every experience conduces to growth. “Some experiences,” Dewey warns, “are miseducative.” This acknowledgement of bad experiences might be taken to imply that there is some value external to experience to which we must hold particular experiences accountable. Dewey insists, however, that no such value exists. Rather, he identifies miseducative experiences as those which have “the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.” Growth, being a form of adjustment to one’s surroundings, requires “sensitivity and [...] responsiveness.” Experiences that “land [one] in a groove or rut,” “promote a slack and careless attitude,” or make one “scatter-brained” by

379. Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee, 2005 (1934), p. 36; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 91; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 13.

380. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 245; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 59; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 95.

their disjointedness, to list a few of his examples, should be avoided. Even experiences that plainly involve some amount of growth may be bad. A “career of burglary,” Dewey writes, certainly involves steadily increasing one’s power over and comfort in one’s environment. But because it “set[s] up conditions that shut out the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions,” it is not truly educative. “When and only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth,” he stipulates, “does it answer to the criterion of education as growing.”³⁸¹

It might seem that by defining the aim of education as the most extensive possible adjustment between individual and environment, Dewey encourages conformism. “There is no room for any individual who wishes to lead his own life in the privacy of reflective self-consciousness,” the *Nation* reviewer complained of *Democracy and Education*. “One is driven to the belief that, in spite of Mr. Dewey’s fine defence of individualism, his moral ideal is really that of the ‘good mixer.’” Although Dewey does not always do enough to dispel this misreading, his writings are unambiguous in their support of solitary reflection and resistance to bad social norms. Individuality, for Dewey, has “a double status and import.” Sometimes the individual is “in [her] world as a member, extending as far as the moving equilibrium of which [she] is a part lends support,” organically integrated into her environment. In these situations, her mind is essentially appreciative, as it “appropriates and enjoys the whole of which [she] is a part.” At other times she “finds a gap” between her own needs and values and the resources of the environment “through which alone [she] can be satisfied.” At that point, if she “surrenders” her desire or grievance, she thwarts her own growth, and takes a dark inward turn into “egotistical solitude.” Her other option is to rebel, to “set out to remake conditions in accord with desire,” even when that involves “disowning” the amenities that “suppor[t her] in secure ease.” At this point her mind becomes no longer appreciative but intelligent: “initiating, adventuring, experimenting,

381. Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone, 1997 (1938), pp. 25, 36.

dissolving.” With luck, through the action of intelligence, “the old self is put off,” while a “new self” begins forming, whose final form “will depend upon the unforeseeable result of an adventure.”

Education, for Dewey, should develop both the appreciative and the intelligent modes. The individual constantly oscillates between these modes in the ebb and flow of experience; there is no question of choosing between them once and for all. So, perhaps it is fair to say that Dewey recognizes two moral ideals: the good mixer and the discontented prophet.³⁸²

Another, mirror-image misreading of Dewey's theory of education as growth, one that has been all too popular among those claiming the mantle of “progressive education,” is that education as growth requires the student to be free from external guidance. On the contrary, Dewey argues that students grow best under the influence of both teachers and peers. This point will be developed more fully in later sections, but here a quick overview may be enough. According to Dewey's notion of experience, as we have seen, an individual can act only through her environment (whether that means with it or against it). When that environment includes other individuals, as it does in a classroom, each individual is both an agent, for herself, and a lever, an “efficient instrumentalit[y],” for others. The only way to move such a situation toward a stable equilibrium (i.e., to achieve growth) is for the individuals involved to adopt a shared vision of how the whole matter, including all the people and objects involved, should be arranged. “Just as the organic circuit concept with its emphasis upon the reactive function of the act had organized psychological thinking,” writes Katherine Camp Mayhew, a teacher at the Laboratory School, “so, Mr. Dewey conceived, constructive cooperative activity was the organizing principle that would bring unity, order, and social concern into the chaos of educational practice.” In practice, this idea meant encouraging students to undertake group projects involving shared materials.³⁸³

382. Cremin, Lawrence. *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957*. New York: Knopf, 1961, p. 126; Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 245.

383. Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey School; the Laboratory School of the University of*

In addressing the guiding role of the teacher, Dewey returns to his observation that the question of whether a given experience is educative or miseducative can only be answered in the future, after its consequences have become apparent. (And never fully answered, since consequences ramify indefinitely.) Since the teacher (hopefully) has “greater maturity of experience” than her students, she is “in a position to evaluate each experience of the young in a way in which the one having the less mature experience cannot do.” Although her evaluation, like all evaluations, must retain its provisional, revisable character, withholding what wisdom she has “means disloyalty to the principle of experience itself,” in “two directions.” The first is that, since the teacher is present in the environment, she, like the students, should contribute to the formation of shared purposes. If she does not, she is an alien, intractable presence. The second is that, as we have seen, true growth is known by its power to promote further growth in the future. Because of the social nature of experience, this criterion applies to growth beyond the individual's own. To allow students to have miseducative experiences – not simply to go through a process of trial and error, but to have experiences that set back growth – is to waste one's own education, to be “false to the understanding that [she] should have obtained from [her] own past experience.” At the same time, the teacher should know from her own experience that experiences in which information is spoonfed and productive challenges are avoided are not particularly educative. So, she must guide without unduly imposing upon or sheltering her students. This is already a tough balancing act, and its difficulty is further exacerbated by Dewey's insistence that, since education must equip the student to adjust to her whole environment, teachers should keep one eye on the shifting social and economic currents into which her students will plunge after they graduate. She must take “a long look ahead” as well as around before stepping into the classroom. Furthermore, although she is expected to familiarize herself with relevant ideas in science and philosophy, she cannot infer any specific course of action from them. “There is incumbent upon the teacher,” Dewey warns, “a more

Chicago, 1896-1903. New York: Atherton, 1966 (1936), p. 462.

serious and harder business” than would be acknowledged by either those, like Herbart or Snedden, who see guidance as a matter of shoehorning individuals into specific social programs, or those, like Montessori, who forswear the idea of guidance altogether.³⁸⁴

One of the main arguments of this chapter is that art, as Dewey understands it, is a supremely useful clue in this educational labyrinth. “Esthetic experience,” Dewey writes, “is experience in its integrity. [...] We might say that esthetic experience is pure experience.” Education, understood as the optimal development of experience, needs to resist the overweening claims of science and philosophy, and even more so of the market economy. It must, ultimately, integrate these things but retain its autonomy. Aesthetic experience demonstrates such autonomy in a unique and powerful way. According to Dewey, aesthetic experience, as we will see in more detail later, “is experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself.” Thus the rhythms of aesthetic experience, in which emotions, values, meanings, ideas, and facts fluidly interplay, can “for[m] standards for the worth of [other] experiences.” The standards set by art apply to both the appreciative and the intellectual or critical sides of education. On the appreciative side, art “enhance[s ...] the qualities which make ordinary experience appealing,” and “reveal[s] a depth and range of meaning in experiences which might otherwise be mediocre and trivial”; by isolating “elements of enjoyable worth,” be they simple elements such as color and tone or more complex gestalt-effects, art makes us more aware of the goods in which we share. On the intellectual or critical side, art can “arouse discontent with conditions which fall below [its] measure,” and “create a demand for surroundings coming up to [its] own level.” In addition to pointing the way for the intellect, it can also be an “effective instrumentalit[y]” in social reform, for example by aiding in the communication of subtleties, and thereby furthering cooperation. As we proceed we will explore other ways in which art

384. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, pp. 38, 76.

encourages both individual and social growth.³⁸⁵

Just as not every experience is educative, not every object or event labeled an artwork performs all of these helpful functions. Indeed, the identification of truly aesthetic experiences is fraught with all the difficulties of identifying educative experiences. (And of course, aesthetic and unaesthetic, like educative and miseducative, are ends of a spectrum on which an experience might fall, not clearly demarcated categories.) As with educative experiences, aesthetic experiences can only be confidently identified in hindsight. A highly aesthetic experience, Dewey writes, might leave one in a state of “fine rapture,” but sometimes later reflection will reveal that “the particular thing in question was not worthy of calling out the rapt seizure; that in fact the latter was caused by factors adventitious to the object itself,” such as the company in which one enjoyed it. In fact, the object, while immediately enjoyable, insightful, or whatever, might, if taken as an exemplar of artistic excellence, lead to a narrowing of one's aesthetic vision, just as the career in burglary, while a kind of growth, narrows one's future avenues of growth. Only time and reflection will tell, and then only subject to revision after more time and reflection. Dewey's vision of “esthetic education” is thus, like his vision of education in general, an “endless circle or spiral” whose “discover[ies] are never made, always making.”³⁸⁶

The Qualities of Educative Experience

Many readers of Dewey have found his concepts of growth, adjustment, and education (all words for the same thing) too vague to serve as guides for action in specific situations. On the one hand, this difficulty might be perceived as a failure of Dewey's pragmatism, since he values ideas only to the extent that they are useful. On the other hand, one might reply, it represents the triumph of Dewey's

385. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 286; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 174.

386. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 152.

pragmatism, since he believes that situations are unique and cannot be referred to fixed canons of thought or behavior. To reconcile these perspectives, we must separate Dewey's notions of ideas that one might have about experience and qualities that one might feel in experience. The terms of this separation are exactly those that Dewey describes in *The Sources of a Science of Education*. Ideas about experience, like scientific findings about education, are essential, and not to be scorned, but experience is, by its nature, too slippery to ever be fully described. As we shall see later in this chapter, the qualities of experience that lie beyond ideas are not (like, say, the Lacanian real) inaccessible to us; rather, they are accessible as emotions, with which we can cultivate a relationship. The endless circle or spiral of growth cannot be fully mapped in any rational space, but its curvature can be felt, and even followed. (We will explore the grounds for this claim in the section on “Meaning” below.)

In one sense, the cycle of growth has a single general quality, to which we can try to attune ourselves. This quality will be easier to grasp, however, if it can be analyzed into several more specific qualities. The rest of this chapter will describe four such qualities that we should always look for in experience: interest, purpose, meaning, and freedom (or integrity). These qualities are all mutually interdependent, so it is not possible to treat one as a foundation for the next. Here, they are ordered in terms of what can roughly be called increasing complexity. The quality of interest concerns the basic dynamics of experience as a transaction between self and environment, rather than existing as purely inward subjectivity or as purely objective inhuman force. The quality of purpose concerns the extension of this transaction through time, so that we adjust to the future as well as the present. The quality of meaning concerns the reflection of purpose's excursions into the future back into an enriched present, a present whose immediacy is now pregnant with possibilities. The quality of freedom concerns the mutual adjustment of our many interests, purposes, and meanings; though, as we shall see, the need for this mutual adjustment is also, in a sense, the source of the other qualities. We will trace these four interdependent qualities through four areas of application that are equally interdependent in

Dewey's thought: personal life, social life, school matters, and aesthetic experience.

Interest

As we have seen in previous chapters, progressive educators, beginning with the Herbartians, criticized the theory of mental discipline for neglecting the role of “interest” in learning. In his influential 1895 essay, *Interest in Relation to the Will*, Dewey summarizes contemporary educational debates about interest and offers his own preliminary theory of its psychological and pedagogical role. In the “Educational Lawsuit” of “Interest vs. Effort [i.e., mental discipline],” he writes, the advocates of interest argue that school topics should be made attractive and fascinating to students if they are ever to learn them, while the advocates of effort argue that, since “life [...] is full of things not interesting, but which have to be faced none the less,” students should be made to work at tasks to which they are indifferent. Dewey's “Verdict” is that both sides have made the mistake of assuming that the lesson is something “outside the sphere of the self,” which must be integrated into the self either by being “*made* interesting” or by exerting “the sheer power of 'will.'” That is, they have located experience within the individual and its objects outside of it, and failed to see that in experience, “the career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way” (to borrow a felicitous phrase from *Art as Experience*). “The genuine principle of interest,” he insists in *Interest in Relation to the Will*, “is the principle of the recognized identity of the fact or proposed line of action with the self; that it lies in the direction of the agent's own growth, and is, therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself.” Even the etymology of the term, he notes, “*inter-esse*, 'to be between,'” suggests “the annihilation of the distance between the person and the materials and results of his action.”³⁸⁷

387. Dewey, John. *Interest as Related to Will*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1899 (1895), pp. 6-9, 13; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 12.

To understand Dewey's concept of interest, then, we must clarify his vision of the interactions between organism and environment. As he argues in "Reflex Arc," an organism's environment is determined, in part, by what the organism can perceive. As he puts it in *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, "the environment is not simply the facts which happen objectively to lie about an agent"; "it is such part of the facts as may be *related* to the capacity and the disposition and gifts of the agent." Two individuals "may have what, to the outward eye, are exactly the same surroundings, and yet each may draw from these surroundings wholly unlike stimulus, material and motives. Each has a different environment, made different by his own mode of selection; by the different way in which his interests and desires play upon the plastic material about him," as a painter might notice light effects, or a hungry person food smells. In the terms of "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," the response creates the stimulus as well as vice versa; the person creates her environment, which also creates her, in an ongoing series of transactions. Dewey's term for these transactions was "functions," which he differentiates from mere subjectivity on one side and perfunctory or coerced behavior on the other. "The citizen exercises his function," for example, "not simply in cultivating sentiments of patriotism within; one has to meet the needs of the city, the country in which one lives." On the other hand a function "is not exercised in bare conformity to certain external requirements. Without the inner disposition and inclination, we call conduct dead, perfunctory, hypocritical." But when an individual modifies her environment in order to exercise a wider range of her own powers, a function is fulfilled and growth occurs. These "functions are *interests*," Dewey declares; more precisely, what is a function from the perspective of an observer is an interest from the perspective of the person involved. From the first-person perspective, interests are the basic units of educative experience.³⁸⁸

Dewey's theory of interest has social as well as pedagogical implications. As an individual grows,

388. Dewey, John. *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*. Ann Arbor: Register Publishing Co., 1891, pp. 99, 100.

and comes into more extensive equilibrium with her environment, she must inevitably come into equilibrium with others, and they with her. Even superficially private activity, for Dewey, exists within a broader social (dis)equilibrium. “We might as well try to imagine a business man doing business, buying and selling, all by himself, as to conceive it possible to define the activities of an individual in terms of his isolated actions,” he insists. “The manufacturer moreover is as truly socially guided in his activities when he is laying plans in the privacy of his own countinghouse as when he is buying his raw material or selling his finished goods.” Thus “there is no inherent opposition between working with others and working as an individual.” On the contrary, “certain capacities of an individual are not brought out except under the stimulus of associating with others,” and “social modifications are the only means of the creation of changed personalities. Institutions are viewed in their educative effect: with reference to the types of individuals they foster.”³⁸⁹

A social environment ill-adjusted with its individual members is unstable, subject both to their attempts to adjust and to the frictions of their maladjustment. As people grow with respect to the social environment, Dewey expects two related developments: specialization, “new divisions of labor” which multiply each individual's vocational avenues to the “growth [...] of specific powers” and “distinguishing traits,” and increasing interdependence, a “widening [...] of the range of persons whose interests have to be taken into account in action.” He notes a historical progression from small, unspecialized tribes through increasingly large and differentiated social units such as the city and the nation, until, as the level of technological interconnection approaches infinity, “in theory, the community of interests and ends is humanity itself” and vocational options multiply indefinitely. This progression, he implies, both results from and demands ever more growth on the individual level. On the one hand, mastery of the physical environment, which flows from intellectual growth, shrinks the world, leading to larger groups of interconnected people capable of action on a larger scale. On the

389. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 12, 220; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 195.

other hand, for this enlarged action to succeed, individuals need to master an ever-wider array of increasingly specialized vocations; and, as a society, they need to solve increasingly complex problems of coordination and collective action. Adjustment to these larger groups “means largely a complete and free development of capacities in knowledge and production” (including the “production of beauty,” whose social uses we will discuss elsewhere). However, growth along the lines of specialization and cooperation is useless unless others are growing along those lines too. Each individual needs the others for her own growth. So, Dewey argues, “our interest in others is not satisfied as long as their intelligence is cramped, their appreciation of truth feeble, their emotions hard and uncomprehensive, their powers of production compressed.” Both for the others' sake and for one's own, one should “will the freeing of all their gifts to the highest degree.” For Dewey, this ideal of multidirectional adjustment “may be termed indifferently 'The Realization of Individuality,' 'The Performance of Specific Functions,' 'The Satisfaction of Interests,' [or] 'The Realization of a Community of Individuals.’”³⁹⁰

The primary issue in the “educational lawsuit” of *Interest v. Effort* is the psychology of motivation; but, as we saw in a previous chapter, the controversy also concerns the centralization of intellectual power (and thus the responsibilities of the teaching profession). The advocates of effort are accused of promoting intellectual tyranny, since they encourage teachers to force students to learn an arbitrary selection of facts; the advocates of interest are accused of promoting intellectual anarchy. By the same stroke with which he finesses the false psychological dichotomy, Dewey finesses the issue of intellectual control. The teacher, he insists, could not directly implant ideas in the student even if she tried. “Purely external direction is impossible,” since she cannot actually reach inside the child's head. She can only educate “indirectly by means of the environment.” Her job is to “utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to [...] buil[d] up experiences that are worth while.” Because people

390. Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, pp. 209, 123, 132.

are always free to respond to their environment in different ways, when she alters the environment “the educator can direct the experience of the young without engaging in imposition.” Those who reject any preestablished curriculum because of fears of imposition should relax; those whose educational vision requires imposition should despair.³⁹¹

For similar reasons, education via interest is antithetical to what Jane Addams (borrowing the phrase from Tolstoy) calls “the snare of preparation,” the deadening sense that one's present activity has no inherent value, but must be endured for the sake of one's future. For mental disciplinarians, imposition is good for its own sake, since it builds mental muscle by forcing the student through an academic obstacle course. For social efficiency educators, on the other hand, imposition may be bad pedagogy, but it is justified by the need to prepare students to fill particular social roles. Dewey argues that this “ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself,” because growth always happens in the present moment of dynamic and unpredictable interchange between person and environment. “We always live at the time we live and not at some other time,” he writes, “and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.” None of this is to say that teachers cannot or should not steer their students toward developing particular skills, attitudes, or bodies of knowledge. They must, however, acknowledge that students' own interests will always cut across their planned trajectories in unpredictable ways, because their interests will never be in these abstract outcomes, but in the situations in which they immediately find themselves. “Learning, a main issue to the teacher, [is] seen as a side issue to the child, a by-product of his activity,” as Mayhew puts it.³⁹²

391. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 22, 17; Dewey, *Experience and Education*, p. 39.

392. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, p. 49; Mayhew and Edwards, *Dewey School*, p. vi.

In keeping with his definition of art as “pure experience,” Dewey finds that “the ideal of interest is exemplified in the artistic attitude.” “Many of our existing social activities, industrial and political,” he observes, “are external” or “mechanical,” involving merely “shifting things about” for reasons extraneous to the “enrichment of emotion and intellect” that accompanies truly interested action. Ordered about by their bosses, or simply forced to accept the constraints of a market economy and corrupt government over which they have no say, people are not “capable of full and free interest in their work.” Conversely, many people retreat from the uncaring world into a comforting solipsism. In contrast with both external coercion and isolation within one's own mind, “the uniquely distinguishing feature of esthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears.” What Dewey means by this is that art epitomizes the expression of emotion.³⁹³

We will discuss other aspects Dewey's theory of emotion elsewhere in this chapter, but for now we can say that emotions are permutations of interest, which arise when an interest cannot be directly acted upon. “Interest,” Dewey notes, “is in the closest relation to the emotional life” as well as the “intellectual life.” To be interested in something is to have an emotion about it, whether positive or negative. This feeling, for Dewey, is related to the self's need to express itself, to realize its capacities and find inner equilibrium by taking an action that alters its environment. The alteration of the environment involves “objective features,” “ideas, objects, etc., to which the interest is attached,” but there are also, given the transactional nature of experience, alterations within the individual, emotional alterations. When the adjustment between the individual and her environment goes smoothly, running in the grooves of habit, “the feeling element drops out.” But when she needs to go beyond habit to deal with some new situation, or when her habits need to be disrupted to achieve some larger goal, she

393. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 100-01; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 259.

experiences a “tension,” a “disturbance or agitation,” which Dewey identifies with emotion. In this account, emotion's role is to “secure a sufficient arousing of energy in critical periods of the life of the agent,” to “brace [...] the agent in coping with the novel element in unexpected [...] situations.”³⁹⁴

Once aroused, this “turbid emotion” can develop in three directions (of which, characteristically for Dewey, the *via media* is preferable to the two extremes). It can be “discharge[d]” as a “stor[m] of passion,” flying “like an arrow” toward some target in the environment, but failing to register its full particularity, as, say, slamming a car horn fails to register the difference between anger and warning. Or it can exhaust itself without affecting the world at all, like the “eruptions of a disturbed infant.” Either way, the emotion becomes a one-note thing, while “significant” emotions are “qualities [...] of a complex experience that moves and changes,” which subtly flicker and morph. They are not states, but events; not static, but unfolding in time according to their own idiosyncratic logic, like a “drama.” To really experience them, often one must divert them into “indirect channels” that are particularly well suited to this drama. “Impatient irritation,” for instance, might be worked through and “tranquilized” by cleaning a room, so that, as the emotion subsides, “the orderly room reflects back to [the individual] the change that has taken place in himself.” His emotion becomes “objectified” in the transformation of the room; his activity, while not necessarily mimetic of his emotion, gives it a nicely calibrated outlet, which allows it to work its inner transformations. This, for Dewey, is the act of expression. As it proceeds, “the emotion operates like a magnet drawing to itself appropriate material[s]” that have “an experienced emotional affinity for the state of mind already moving”: in this case, the items strewn around the messy room, and the various containers where they are put away. The “dynamic force” governing the “selection and assemblage” of these materials is interest, the initial *raison d’être* of emotion. As interest works itself out in expression, the self, as in any realization of interest, is transformed. “The self,” Dewey writes, is “created in the creation of objects” or events (a distinction he

394. Dewey, *Interest as Related to the Training of the Will*, pp. 5, 15, 20-21.

does not observe because “objects are events”), because this creation “demands active adaptation to external materials, including a modification of the self so as to utilize and thereby overcome external necessities by incorporating them in an individual vision and expression.”³⁹⁵

Whenever, in doing or making anything, one uses one's activity as an outlet for emotional expression, one's experience becomes, to that degree, aesthetic. In aesthetic experience, the things in one's environment (including the cultural environment that is language) become “eloquent medi[a]” that translate qualities of “emotional value” from inchoate mental form to developed objective form. One's activity, as in Dewey's example of the man cleaning his room, may be simultaneously expressive and practical. Indeed, he hopes that all economic production will approach this condition. One is sure, however, to experience emotions that are so complex that they elude expression in an activity that serves extraneous purposes. These emotions need to be expressed in activity specially tailored for them. Although he resists any strict separation of the two, Dewey calls objects or events that are both productive and expressive “useful art,” and those that are purely expressive “fine art.” When one creates or actively appreciates art, whether a fine art object, a piece of furniture, or simply the expressive element of an everyday activity such as cleaning a room, one experiences a “full and free play of interest” that keeps the self limber and savvy, and thus readier to grow into novel situations. This is the first of several ways of understanding Dewey's identification of aesthetic experience with educative experience.³⁹⁶

Purpose

So far it may appear that interest occurs in a perpetual present tense, one moment forgotten as it

395. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 43, 63-80, 277, 293; Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 318.

396. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 238.

permutes into the next. While there is some truth to this idea (to which we will return in the section on meaning), for Dewey interests cannot be fully understood without accounting for the role of memory and foresight in experience. In the process of growth, one adjusts to an environment that includes a past and a future (or rather, a range of possible futures), bound together by a skein of causal links whose presence can be felt in the here and now. To properly account for these continuities, for Dewey, one must develop “purposes” (or “aims”), but in such a way that the perpetual-present dynamics of interest are not disturbed. In explaining how to strike that balance, Dewey introduces distinctions between ends and means, and between work and play, only (as usual) to advise that in educative and aesthetic experiences these distinctions must be dissolved.

Dewey distinguishes between “ends” and purposes or aims. Ends are not manufactured in the mind and then imposed on the world. Rather, ends are embedded in nature itself, not uniformly, but as a rhizomatic network of crisscrossing “intrinsic continuities.” Some natural processes, like waves moving back and forth in a pond, are “a mere serial aggregate” of events, which might have occurred in various sequences other than the one in which they actually occurred. While the wind is from the north the waves will move south, regardless of what direction the wind was blowing an hour earlier. Other processes, however, imply a specific sequence of events. The creation of honey, to use one of Dewey's examples, depends on bees visiting flowers, returning to the hive with nectar, and processing the nectar. In his terms, making the honey is the “end” of an intrinsic continuity, even though it is unclear whether the bees are planning to make the honey or whether they are driven from one step of the process to the next by blind instinct. “The results of the bees' actions may be called ends not because they are designed or consciously intended,” that is, “but because they are true terminations or completions of what has preceded.” In a process with an end, “each prior event leads into its successor while the successor takes up what is furnished and utilizes it for some other stage, until we arrive at the end, which, as it were, summarizes and finishes off the process.” (If one adopts a deterministic view of

physics, everything in nature might be said to be one cosmic continuity, and every state of affairs the “end” of all the physical interactions that preceded it. In practice, however, continuities are only worth identifying to the extent that we can predict their ends.)³⁹⁷

As distinct from these natural ends, a purpose or aim, or, as Dewey also puts it, an “end-in-view,” represents a conscious interest in the realization of some potential continuity. We cannot summon honey out of thin air. If we aim to sell honey, we should see to it that the environment is favorable to the bees' production. Or, if we aim to make synthetic honey, that the environment in our laboratory is favorable to the predictable continuities of the relevant chemical reactions. “The aim set up,” in short, “must be an outgrowth of existing conditions [...] based upon a consideration of what is already going on[,] upon the resources and difficulties of the situation.” (This applies to our own psychological and cultural resources as well as the resources in our environment.) In Dewey's “aleatory universe,” moreover, we should expect the unexpected, and be ready for our acts to alter the very situations on which we base our plans. “The aim as it first emerges,” for Dewey, should be “a mere tentative sketch” which we expect to revise and fill in as we go; it should be “experimental, and hence constantly growing as it is tested in action.” The choice of an aim should be inseparable from the process of its realization; “an end established externally to the process of action is always rigid,” fragile, artificial. Like interests, aims apply to ongoing transactions, “intimate interchanges” between self and environment, and not to static objects, mental states, or states of affairs. If we aim to possess objects, for instance, it should be because of the further development of interests that they enable. “The doing with the thing, not the thing in isolation, is [the proper] end.”³⁹⁸

The expanded doing at which we should properly aim has an open-ended quality. Because it is wider than our present capacities, we cannot really know what it will involve until we achieve it. As we

397. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 76-78.

398. Ibid.

move toward this distant and vague horizon of widened activity, however, we can pick out near and definite aims that will help us on our way. Our purposes are arrangements of existing continuities, and so can extend no farther than we have “foresight of results.” In undertakings directly concerned with the enrichment of experience, including education, art, and some aspects of politics and psychotherapy, there can be no “remote external aim,” no “final goal,” but only “directions of change in the quality of experience.” In such fields, “growth itself is the only moral 'end,’” and we must embrace its distinctive dynamic of the “endless circle or spiral [...] demand[ing] more thought, more science, and so on, in everlasting sequence” as we continually redefine it. Since our more immediate aims should always have as their final term just this kind of “freeing of activities,” the qualities of uncertainty, experimentalism, and so forth that characterize good educational practice are always present as a trace within our most concrete plans.³⁹⁹

It is through the quality of purpose that Dewey distinguishes thinking from other mental states. If consciousness is naturally, à la William James, a “stream or flow,” in thinking it “becomes a train, chain, or thread” directed at a distinctive end-in-view: the establishment of a “belief about facts or in truths,” the “acceptance or rejection of something as reasonably probable or improbable [...] in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.” Unlike, say, daydreaming, thinking “involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a *con*-sequence – a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors.” As in a natural continuity, “each phase” of thinking “is a step from something to something [...] leav[ing] a desposit which is utilized in the next term.” Because, for any pragmatist, such beliefs are ultimately grounded in concrete interests, thinking is always situational, invoked in the service of some other purpose which has been frustrated by some “perplexity.” We aim, say, to deliver a valuable package to someone's house, but do not know whether the recipient is at

399. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 177; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 77.

home. Thinking processes whatever observations may be relevant, such as the lights being on or off, or cars being present or absent in the driveway, working through their consequences to establish a belief about the recipient's being home or not, so that we may go on with our larger plan. Thinking requires that we have a coherent purpose, and, using definite beliefs as scaffolding, extends the connections, consequences, and continuities involved in that purpose until they link up well enough for us to really know what we are doing. There can be no truly idle thinking, and thinking is clouded when one is at cross purposes with oneself, unsure of the consequences that one wishes to discern.⁴⁰⁰

Ideally, the quality of purpose would permeate all of our activity. Yet Dewey does not disparage spontaneity or playfulness. Dewey's theory of aims leads him to reject the distinction between work and play as formulated by many of his educational contemporaries, including social efficiency thinkers such as Franklin Bobbitt as well as some child-centrists. The bad version of this distinction, for Dewey, identifies play with "interest in activity for its own sake," and work with interest in the "external result" of activity. If this were so, since good aims target activity rather than results, then play would be the only kind of educative experience (a conclusion that some educators accept, but Dewey does not). Rather, Dewey insists, both work and play "equally exemplify interest in an activity 'for its own sake,'" and are equally opposed to what he calls "drudgery," meaning activity without intrinsic interest. While play's interest is "in an activity just as it flows on from moment to moment," work's interest is "in an activity as tending to a culmination"; work, that is, involves both interest and purpose. When we work, our interest in following a certain "thread of continuity" to its conclusion carries us through stretches that are not especially interesting in themselves. Work thus involves "mediate interests," which take on "value as part of [the] larger whole" of purpose. As children, in the course of their normal development, become better at tracing continuities in their environment, their interests naturally expand beyond the perpetual present of pure play, into work; but this expansion inevitably involves gaps, as they grasp at

400. Dewey, John. *How We Think*. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1910, pp. 2-11.

continuities whose full complexity eludes them. When children look to adults (as well as other children) to close these gaps, they open a new channel for adult guidance which, far from overriding their purposes, is necessary to their realization. In school work, the teacher's role as a mediator between the child and the curriculum involves "present[ing] new material in such a way as to enable the child to appreciate its bearings, its relationships, its necessity" to the child's own purposes. Another way of stating Dewey's distinction between work and play is that each represents a phase in the construction of purpose. Play, by following "the unfolding of [a process] on its own account," leads to the discovery of continuities in the world, even if it has no interest in these continuities as continuities, but only in their moment-to-moment permutation. Work, meanwhile, pursues a continuity that has already been identified. To be both focused and flexible in our aims, we must alternate between these two modes. Or, better, be "playful and serious at the same time," which Dewey describes as "the ideal mental condition."⁴⁰¹

The quality of purpose, which is a precondition and effect of reflective thinking, depends on social arrangements as well as individual habits of mind. ("The notion that intelligence is a personal endowment or personal attainment," writes Dewey, "is the great conceit of the intellectual class, as that of the commercial class is that wealth is something which they personally have wrought and possess.") Ideally, the quality of purpose would permeate every aspect of our activity. Bad social conditions, however, interfere with this quality by introducing "adventitious" motives. A bad teacher, say, uses extrinsic rewards and punishments to induce students to do work that they do not care about. In that case the student's true purpose is getting a grade, which requires making a certain impression on the teacher, which requires doing some piece of work in a certain way. Although the work is still part of the student's overarching purpose, she does not see any purpose in the work itself; she does not feel that it

401. Dewey, *How We Think*, p. 164; Dewey, *Interest as Related to the Training of the Will*, pp. 16-17; Dewey, *How We Think*, p. 19.

frees her for fuller activity. Naturally, this critique extends beyond the classroom to encompass all kinds of work that is done solely for money (though the target of Dewey's criticism is always the economic system, not the individual worker). The ill effects apply to employers as well as employees, since, by farming out fixed portions of their operations according to specific contracts, they introduce a quality of rigidity that works against the flexibility of a well-formed purpose. So, in a factory in which each worker "operate[s] simply for the sake of a separate result—his own pay," no one's experience is purposeful, and the process as a whole is also deficient in purpose, even though each worker's "respective doings contribute to a single outcome." If, on the other hand, the workers were interested in the product rather than the paycheck, they would at once begin to "vie[w] the consequences of [their] own acts as having a bearing upon what others are doing" and vice versa. Each worker's interest in the final product, the "common consequence" uniting the group, would entail, according to Dewey's notion of the inseparability of means and ends, an interest in all the means used to reach it. The result would be "genuine intercourse or association," leading to a truly "common intent," a common purpose. This purpose would not be common in the sense that it would be identical for each participant, but in the sense that each participant would be involved, proportionately to their responsibilities, in the back-and-forth of its constant revisions. Only under such conditions can individual experience retain the quality of purpose in social life. "Full education," as Dewey puts it, "comes only when there is a responsible share on the part of each person, in proportion to capacity, in shaping the aims and policies of the social groups to which he belongs."⁴⁰²

The political corollary to that idea is democracy. Rather than identifying democracy with "some form of government," Dewey insists that "it is but a name for the fact that human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups: families, industrial companies, governments, churches, scientific

402. Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: Henry Holt, 1927, p. 211; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 26; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 209.

associations and so on.” His more oft-cited definition, from *The Public and Its Problems*, runs:

“Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.” In both of these instances (as well as many others) Dewey identifies democracy with the ongoing work of finding shared purpose, as both a cause and a consequence of purposeful individual lives. As social groups naturally become larger and more diverse, Dewey advises, this work calls for an increasing amount of “social endosmosis,” or “variety of shared undertakings and experiences”; “the experience of each party [in a group] loses in meaning when the free interchange of varying modes of life-experience is arrested” by any kind of class hierarchy. Although Dewey is adamant that economic production must be included in the regime of shared purpose, he sees that goal as part of a larger project of ongoing cultural reconstruction. If that reconstruction is to “aris[e] from equitably distributed interests,” rather than being imposed by an elite, the first “prerequisite” is to make “the basis of life [...] secure” for all, so that “all individuals may actively share in the wealth of cultural resources that now exist and may contribute, each in each in his own way, to their further enrichment.” That preliminary goal, in turn, “cannot be established by an unplanned and external convergence of the actions of separate individuals, each of whom is bent on personal private advantage” (an arrangement already incompatible with truly shared purposes), but requires, at the very least, a robust welfare state.⁴⁰³

While coalescence around shared purposes is a general end-in-view for social reform, in his preface to *The Dewey School* Dewey describes “the relation between individual freedom and collective

403. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 209; Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 148; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 64, 75; Dewey, John. *Liberalism and Social Action*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000 (1935), pp. 61, 59.

well-being,” and the task of “achieving both of these values without the sacrifice of either one,” as “the dominant problem of civilization for many years to come.” Along with other progressives of a social-democratic bent, Dewey finds himself mediating between partisans of laissez-faire and individual freedom on the one hand, and authoritarianism and collective well-being on the other. Neither of these orientations can adequately imagine the blending of individual and collective outlooks that make up a properly shared purpose. In the Laboratory School, Dewey hopes to “create a form of community life and organization in which both of these values are conserved,” preserved in a solution of classroom democracy.⁴⁰⁴

One way to describe individual freedom is as the power to act on one's own aims. (Although, as we shall see in a later section of this chapter, Deweyan “freedom” also has other, quite different facets.) Also, as we have seen, Dewey identifies thinking as the mind in a state of purposefulness. Thus, for Dewey, “the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while.” While this idea might seem a bit flippant, we should remember that Dewey believes that any form of coercion vitiates the quality of purposiveness and undermines freedom of intelligence. In the classroom, freedom of intelligence obviously demands that teachers abandon the forced march through a pre-fab curriculum that characterized much nineteenth-century American schooling. It also demands, however, something more than unguided free play. For one thing, thinking involves dwelling, for a while at least, in a state of doubt and hesitation; it requires “stoppage of the immediate manifestation of impulse until that impulse has been brought into connection with other possible tendencies to action so that a more comprehensive and coherent plan of activity is formed.” This negative capability can be reinforced by good habits of patience, observation, and memory, toward which the teacher can steer her students without compromising their freedom, since these habits themselves are constituents of that

404. Mayhew and Edwards, *Dewey School*, p. xv.

freedom. Although there is always some risk that the teacher will mistake bad habits for good ones, and thereby really tyrannize her students, for a teacher to make no attempt to instill good habits is even more risky. “It may be a loss rather than a gain to escape from the control of another person only to find one's conduct dictated by immediate whim and caprice,” Dewey admonishes.⁴⁰⁵

Aside from the question of what ends leaders in the idealized democracy of the classroom should pursue, what habits, facts, skills, or attitudes they should promote, there is also the question of how these leaders (often teachers, but sometimes, as when students are split into workgroups, students) rise to their position of influence. It is difficult, in principle, to distinguish between a group of people organically coalescing around a leader who channels their plural interests into a shared dynamic purpose, and an egotistical person doing the bare minimum to satisfy various constituencies in order to wield power. The difference between these two scenarios is felt in the quality of experience, and can never be entirely captured by any set of political institutions or theories. In resolving this conundrum, as elsewhere in his educational writings, Dewey relies on children's natural attunement to the qualities of educative experience, a sensitivity they retain as long as they are not miseducated by either imposition or neglect. “The number of children who do not feel the difference [...] between action that is motivated by personal power and desire to dictate and action that is fair, because in the interest of all, is small,” he observes. “I should even be willing to say that upon the whole children are more sensitive to the signs and symptoms of this difference than are adults.”⁴⁰⁶

Among potential leaders who have the right motives, children will naturally vest “the most mature member of the group” with “responsibility for the conduct of the interactions and intercommunications which are the very life of the group as a community.” In exercising this responsibility, Dewey insists, “there is no ground for holding that the teacher should not suggest anything to the child until he

405. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, pp. 70-72.

406. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

has *consciously* expressed a want in that direction.” To shepherd a shared purpose into existence is not simply a matter of weighing preexisting individual purposes; it also involves bending those purposes along convergent lines of positive development. The teacher, writes Dewey, should offer flexible “suggestions,” not rigid orders, and, “by watching the child and seeing the attitude that he assumes,” determine “whether they are external, arbitrary impositions interfering with normal growth,” or means to further the child's activity. The teacher mediates between the child and the curriculum, constantly shuttling back and forth between the psychological needs of individual students, to ignore which leads to drudgery, and the logically organized knowledge she is charged with passing on, without which there can be no *sensus communis* on which to build shared purposes. At the Laboratory School, teachers used a “two-dimensional curriculum,” describing each lesson on two separate forms. One, “From the Child's Standpoint,” described “the series of activities through which the child passes in becoming conscious of the basis of social life”; the other, “From the Teacher's Standpoint,” noted “the opportunities afforded for the enrichment and extension of the child's experience in connection with these activities.”⁴⁰⁷

In these prescriptions for cultivating shared purposes in an idealized classroom environment, responsibility spontaneously flows toward those of more mature experience. In the classroom this hierarchy seems to make the best of the blatant asymmetry of experience between teacher and students. When it comes to adult life, however, the implications are ambiguous. As Dewey describes the situation in *The Child and the Curriculum*, the teacher has two things that her students lack. She has more mature experience, greater practical wisdom in all things. From her students' perspective, this superior experience entitles her to lead. She also understands a specific body of knowledge, which she must communicate. *The Child and the Curriculum* describes the techniques by which this (from the

407. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, p. 56; Dewey, John. *The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1915 (1901), p. 81; Tanner, Laurel. *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997, p. 47.

child's perspective) expert knowledge can be transmitted, but only by someone who also has more generally mature experience than her audience. These techniques, then, habituate students to absorb expert knowledge from people whom they trust implicitly because of their general wisdom. They do not teach them how to respond to people with some narrow but real expertise whose broader habits of mind are miseducative, like some economists who argue politics. Nor do they teach them how to respond to people who seem trustworthy enough on the grounds of general wisdom, but who wrongly claim to understand specific areas of expertise, like some politicians who argue economics. It would be unfair to the students, and untrue to Dewey's vision of the school as an idealized community free of miseducative influences, to bring either of these types of people into the classroom. They are, of course, everywhere outside the classroom (and in it too, often enough). Dewey addresses this discrepancy in (at least) two ways. To guard against politicians posing as economists, he hopes to develop scientific habits of mind in his students, the patience and perseverance needed to determine the factual grounds on which assertions rest. Much of *The Public and Its Problems* is concerned with how these habits can be socially extended into chains of credibility linking real experts to the educated public. To guard against economists posing as politicians, on the other hand, requires a sense of the limits of science and a comfort in the zones that lie beyond. As we will see in a later section, it requires what Dewey calls imagination.

Like the quality of interest, purpose finds its highest expression in aesthetic experience. Good art exemplifies the perfect blending of work and play that characterizes purposeful experience. Bad artists are either too playful, “preoccupied overmuch” with the locally interesting possibilities of their “means and materials” at the expense of a controlling vision, or too serious, their “animating idea [...] in excess of the command of method” and their “presentation [...] too defective to express the feeling thoroughly.” In the well-performed expressive act, on the other hand, “the thought of the end becomes

so adequate that it compels translation into the means that embody it”; the materials take their place in a continuity of purpose, and become true media. While this “attitude” is “typical of the artist,” it reflects a general quality of educative experience, and “may be displayed in all activities.” The teacher, who is fundamentally concerned with these general qualities, is therefore also an artist, whose “rank [...] is measured by his ability to foster the attitude of the artist in those who study with him,” to “nurture inspiring aim and executive means into harmony with each other.” This combined resoluteness and flexibility at which the teacher aims is also vital to participating, as an equal rather than a master or servant, in the perpetual give-and-take of which shared purposes are born.⁴⁰⁸

In one of the central passages of *Art as Experience*, Dewey describes aesthetic experience as “an experience.” If art is expression because of it realizes the quality of interest, it is *an* experience because it realizes the quality of purpose. In introducing the concept of *an* experience, Dewey offers a concise summary of the evolution of the qualities of experience. In the “contintuou[s ...] interaction of live creature and environing conditions,” the self alternates between equilibrium, where it experiences appreciation, and disequilibrium. In the latter state of “resistance and conflict,” experience becomes “qualif[ied]” with “emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges.” That is, it develops emotional and intellectual interest, and, from there, purpose. Purpose, in turn, overcomes the initial resistance by directing thought to existing consequential links which can be levered to alter it; equilibrium is restored on firmer footing, and the cycle of growth begins anew. Everyday experience, however, often deviates from this trajectory. “There is distraction and dispersion,” Dewey laments; “what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. We put our hands to the plow and turn back; we start and then we stop,” but “not because the experience has reached the end for the sake of which it was initiated.” We do not weave our interests into a purpose; we follow loose threads. In order to complete the cycle of growth, “the material experienced” must “ru[n] its course to

408. Dewey, *How We Think*, pp. 219-21.

fulfillment,” its intrinsic continuities fully explored, as when “a piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation.” In a fully aesthetic experience, the potential (emotional, expressive) consequences latent within its media and subject-matter are fully recognized and integrated into one end-in-view. And conversely, wherever this integration occurs, experience is aesthetic. Dewey illustrates by asking us to imagine a conscious stone:

The stone starts from somewhere, and moves, as consistently as conditions permit, toward a place and state where it will be at rest--toward an end. Let us add, by imagination, to these external facts the ideas that it looks forward with desire to the final outcome; that it is interested in the things it meets on its way, conditions that accelerate and retard its movement with respect to their bearing on the end; that it acts and feels toward them according to the hindering or helping function it attributes to them; and that the final coming to rest is related to all that went before as the culmination of a continuous movement. Then the stone would have an experience, and one with esthetic quality.⁴⁰⁹

Meaning

Purpose and its associated quality of intelligence are concerned with the intrinsic continuities linking present experience to the past and the future. With purpose, interests lose their moment-to-moment immediacy, as we pause to reflect on how the present has been shaped by what came before, and on the possible shapes of things to come. Once the period of reflection is over, however, we do not return to the same present that we left. Reflection leaves a residue in our future present-tense experiences, a vital leaven that Dewey calls “meaning.” There is no limit to how much meaning an object or event might accrue. Old meanings can be revised or forgotten, but, if experience is educative, new ones will replace them faster than they are lost. Dewey goes so far as to say that “it is the chief business of life at every point to make living [...] contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning,” and that a “technical definition of education” would be “that reconstruction or

409. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 36, 41.

reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience.”⁴¹⁰

Dewey's notion of meaning encompasses several different contexts in which the term is commonly used, including the meaning of words, of events, and even the meaning of life. In each case, he identifies meaning with awareness of the intrinsic continuities that flow through things, as these continuities are discovered by reflective thinking. As we know, “discord is the occasion that induces reflection,” which identifies “objects as conditioneds of realization of harmony”; once harmony has been restored through the use of these objects, the “material of reflection is incorporated into objects as their meaning.” Say we are lost in the desert with no water, and we find a well, with a bucket that can be lowered with a crank. A moment's reflection indicates how the various objects – well, crank, bucket – can be used to restore us to equilibrium. Each object then takes on a definite meaning in relation to our felt need, according to the part it can play in satisfying that need. These meanings cannot be reduced to propositions, such as “a bucket means something that holds water, which slakes thirst.” They depend on the quality of our feeling. Are we just starting to get thirsty, or are we about to die of thirst? Are we well and truly lost, or do we think we could find our way back to civilization in a few hours? Such considerations will determine the quality of our purpose, such as the ways in which we can and cannot be flexible about our plan to drink from this well. It is relative to these qualities of purpose that meaning is defined. “When things have a meaning for us,” as Dewey puts it, “we mean (intend, propose) what we do” with them. Thus he rejects the traditional philosophical account in which “an object, stone, orange, tree, chair, is supposed to convey different impressions of color, shape, size, hardness, smell, taste, etc., which aggregated together constitute the characteristic meaning of each thing.” Rather, he insists, “it is the characteristic use to which the thing is put, because of its specific qualities, which supplies the meaning with which it is identified. A chair is a thing which is put to one use; a table, a thing which is employed for another purpose; an orange is a thing which costs so much,

410. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 59.

which is grown in warm climes, which is eaten, and when eaten has an agreeable odor and refreshing taste, etc.”⁴¹¹

If meaning is a byproduct of purpose, shared meanings arise from shared purposes. Dewey thinks of language as a set of sounds and images which have acquired shared meanings in much the same way that a chair or an orange acquire their meanings. “The sound h-a-t gains meaning in precisely the same way that the thing 'hat' gains it, by being used in a given way,” he argues. For an infant, the sound comes to mean the object via its involvement in an interest that is shared between the child and, in Dewey's example, its mother: “When the mother is taking the infant out of doors, she says 'hat' as she puts something on the baby's head. Being taken out becomes an interest to the child; mother and child not only go out with each other physically, but both are concerned in the going out; they enjoy it in common. By conjunction with the other factors in activity the sound 'hat' soon gets the same meaning for the child that it has for the parent; it becomes a sign of the activity into which it enters.” For adults, words also acquire meanings when “they are used in a common experience [...] in an action where what each does depends upon and influences what the other does.” When hunting together, for instance, if “a certain signal meant 'move to the right' to the one who uttered it, and 'move to the left' to the one who heard it, they obviously could not successfully carry on their hunt together. Understanding one another means that [...] sounds have the same value for both with respect to carrying on a common pursuit.” What goes for sounds, of course, also goes for other objects which take on meanings in the context of shared activities.⁴¹²

Meaning is acquired by the interaction of objects with purpose and intelligence, but it need not always be experienced via those forward-looking qualities. Once an object acquires meanings, they can be experienced appreciatively rather than intelligently, from the perspective of enjoyed equilibrium.

411. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 14; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 25.

412. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 15.

The meanings, rather than being layered on top of the object, become integrated into it and can be experienced on a moment-to-moment basis. An antique map, say, may have initially gotten its meanings in the context of definite purposes (of navigation, territorial dispute, et cetera), but if a reproduction of the map is used as décor in a waiting room, we can appreciate its meanings when we are unthinking and relaxed. These moments of appreciation remind us of the many features of the world with which we are currently in equilibrium, and in doing so they prepare us to better handle the inevitable moments of disequilibrium, since the meanings involved in the appreciative, equilibrated phase of experience are the same as those involved in the intelligent, disequilibrated phase. When an intellectual, such as a scientist, apprehends the meaning of an object, he characteristically “does not rest in it; he passes on to another problem using an attained solution only as a stepping stone from which to set on foot further inquiries.” The artist, by contrast, “cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved,” and savors meanings that have no immediate application to further inquiry. “The difference between the esthetic and the intellectual is thus one of the place where emphasis falls in the constant rhythm that marks the interaction of the live creature with his surroundings,” Dewey writes. “The ultimate matter of both emphases in experience is the same.” Needless to say, just because artists are especially attentive to the appreciative phase of experience does not mean that this phase is experienced only in art; we drift into and out of it all the time.⁴¹³

Meanings, for Dewey, are perceptions of the relations among things; but, as Henry James says (in the preface to the New York edition of *Roderick Hudson*), “really, universally, relations stop nowhere.” For reflective intelligence, meanings must be contained and discrete, fitting into some definite chain of consequences. Really, however, continuities always leave loose ends, infinite in number. The world is knitted together from countless chains of consequence entangled in a shifting pattern of unimaginable complexity. While “the action of deliberation, as we have seen, consists in selecting some foreseen

413. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 14.

consequence to serve as a stimulus to present action [...] the selected consequence is set in an indefinite context of other consequences” which we can never fully understand. The ends that we foresee and adopt as our own only “mark out a little island in an infinite sea.” Human purposes, after all, merely address the “perplexities and confusions” of the present situation; intelligence “but throws a spotlight” on a “little part of the whole,” though “even if the light is flickering and the illuminated portion stands forth only dimly from the shadowy background, it suffices if we are shown the way to move.”⁴¹⁴

We are, or should be, aware of this “dim and total background consciousness of every distinct thought,” but the background can never enter thought as one of its definite terms. Or rather, if part of it does rise to the foreground of consciousness, an infinitely vast background still remains. Our relation to this background is thus twofold. Without intelligence's perpetual excursions, its castings of light into the darkness, our intuitions about the background would be impoverished. Our relation to the background as an enduring fact, however, rather than as material to bring into the foreground, is not intellectual but emotional. (“Though consciousness of [the background] cannot become intellectualized,” Dewey remarks, “yet emotional appreciation of it is won only by those willing to think.”) At the limits of our intelligent foresight, we have feelings about ideas, objects, and events. This “background of feeling, of diffused emotion [...] forms the stuff of the ideal,” in the sense that it orients our immediate purposes toward our vague sense of the workings of the universe as a whole. Because relations stop nowhere, “in a genuine sense every act is already possessed of infinite import” as its consequences ripple out. Our emotional awareness of the background colors our evaluation of our specific purposes, which can evoke positive or negative emotions depending on how well they square with our ineffable intuitions about how the world hangs together. Purposes that align with these intuitions take on a glow of idealism; those that do not so align will feel, in some nebulous way, false or

414. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 14.

shallow. We know, on some level, that they will lead us out on isolated limbs, away from the common world that underlies shared purposes. Thus, for Dewey, “the sense of an extensive and underlying whole is the context of every experience and it is the essence of sanity. For the mad, the insane, thing to us is that which is torn from the common context and which stands alone and isolated.”⁴¹⁵

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey argues that, rather than positing a singular public and discussing its capabilities and responsibilities, political theorists should think of publics in the plural. Publics, he argues, are constituted in response to externalities, consequences originating in the decisions of one group that affect people outside that group. Externalities arise constantly, and, when they are recognized by the people they effect, publics constantly emerge to address them. (The relatively rigid institutions that create megapublics such as the American presidential electorate are, ideally, simply tools with which specific publics can get the leverage needed to address specific externalities.) It is not always easy to identify externalities, however. “Many consequences” of others’ activity, Dewey observes, “are felt rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not, by those who experience them, referred to their origins.” It is the task of scientists and journalists to identify the remote causes of suffering and make clear their connection with specific grievances (by, say, identifying toxic byproducts of manufacturing, and finding out where they originate and what they do to people and the environment). That is, they must establish the meaning of insiders’ actions so that outsiders can determine whether they should try to stop them. In politics as elsewhere, however, these definite, intellectualized meanings are only part of the story. There is also the background to consider. “Anyone who looked too far abroad with regard to the outcome of what he is proposing to do,” Dewey notes, would “soon be lost in a hopelessly complicated muddle of considerations.” In this muddle, it is impossible to tell positive externalities from negative ones, or

415. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 306; Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 263; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 202.

from things that are not externalities at all. To protect itself, then, a public must “establis[h] certain dikes and channels so that actions are confined within prescribed limits, and insofar have moderately predictable consequences.” In general, what Dewey has in mind here are laws, although cultural norms may also fall under this rubric. These channels of intelligible meaning, however, relate to their unintelligible background in the same way that all the works of purpose and intelligence do. They cannot shut out intuitions about the “hopelessly complicated muddle of considerations,” but must preserve them as a feeling of idealism, or its lack. If publics are an artifact of meanings, then behind the specific meanings that give rise to specific publics, there is a singular (if shifting) ideal background of meaning that corresponds to a singular (if shifting) ideal public, the public that we might have if we knew how all of our activities would cash out in the future. It is from this the ideal public, which we can access only as a feeling, that we should extract specific publics, as we extract specific purposes from ideal meanings.⁴¹⁶

In Dewey's initial conception of the Laboratory School, adding meaning to experience, alongside basing education in students' interests, is the central goal. In an 1894 letter to his wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, he writes:

There is an image of a school growing up in my mind all the time, a school where some actual and literal constructive activity shall be the centre and source of the whole thing, and from which the work should be always growing out in two directions – one the social bearings of that constructive industry, the other the contact with nature which supplies it with its materials. I can see, theoretically, how the carpentry etc. in building a model house shall be the centre of a social training on the one side and a scientific on the other, all held within the grasp of a positive concrete physical habit of eye and hand.⁴¹⁷

This letter lays out Dewey's basic concept of teaching via simplified versions of real adult occupations.

One advantage of these occupations is that they embed the abstract concepts that traditionally defined the curriculum into “concrete physical” activity that appeals to the typical young child's proclivity for

416. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, pp. 52, 131.

417. Quoted in Westbrook, John. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991, pp. 95-96.

what educators today call kinesthetic learning, learning through touch and bodily activity. Thus the occupations preserve the quality of interest. Another advantage of the occupations is that they naturally extend meanings outward from the classroom, toward both nature and society. The cereal-making occupation (a favorite at the Laboratory School) involves students in continuities intrinsic to nature (those pertaining to heating and drying various plants, for instance) and to society (the arrangements by which cereal's raw materials are cultivated, sold, transported, et cetera). "The children," Dewey assures parents, "get a good deal of chemistry in connection with cooking, of number work and geometrical principles in carpentry, and a good deal of geography in connection with their theoretical work in weaving and sewing. History also comes in with the origin and growth of various inventions, and their effects upon social life and political organization." Ideally, in Dewey's scheme, once they take an interest in cereal-making, students will be drawn in both of these directions; "the teacher's part," rather than sitting students down to teach science or social studies as separate subject, is, by exposing the students to the tantalizing ramifications of their present activity, "to contrive that one result should lead through one meaning to another, to ever more meaningful results." In addition to extending students' interests from the immediate outward, the occupations can also be thought of as offering a stable structure – a "dike" or "channel," in the terms of *The Public and Its Problems* – in which students' boundless curiosity about an infinitely interrelated world can be contained. "An occupation," Dewey affirms, "is of necessity a continuous thing. It lasts, not only for days, but for months and years. It represents, not a stirring of isolated and superficial energies, but rather a steady, continuous organization of power along certain general lines. [...] The occupations articulate a vast variety of impulses, otherwise separate and spasmodic, into a consistent skeleton with a firm backbone. It may well be doubted whether, wholly apart from some such regular and progressive modes of action, extending as cores throughout the entire school, it would be permanently safe to give the principle of

"interest" any large place in school work."⁴¹⁸

The Laboratory School introduces fine arts to address the ideal background. Just as intelligence must be pushed to its limits before there can be a really fruitful encounter with the ideal background, Dewey holds that "genuine art," which "represent[s ...] the idealization [...] of all the work carried on" at the school, "grows out of the work of the artisan," and does not "spring up in a separate atmosphere" away from definite everyday purposes and activities. Art shows how the occupations can become "instrument[s] of expression" for the emotions through which we relate to the ideal, as when weaving (another Laboratory School favorite) is used to make beautiful tapestries. The transition from the quotidian to the fine-art side of weaving should, Dewey argues, be gradual. If he had money enough and time, he writes, his school would have a "workshop" where students could "d[o] actual things in sewing, spinning, and weaving," and "come into immediate connection with the materials, with various fabrics of silk, cotton, linen and wool." Once they are absorbed in these materials and tasks, in Dewey's fantasy, "information at once appears in connection with these materials; their origin, history, their adaptation to particular uses, and the machines of various kinds by which the raw materials are utilized," illustrated by "a complete industrial museum, giving samples of materials in various stages of manufacture, and the implements, from the simplest to the most complex, used in dealing with them" and "a collection of photographs and pictures illustrating the landscapes and the scenes from which the materials come, their native homes, and their places of manufacture." As their knowledge depends, they start to appreciate woven goods as means of expression. At this point, "literature would contribute its part" by showing how, say, Penelope in the *Odyssey* uses weaving to embody a whole way of life, her particular historical "phase of social life" with its characteristic attitudes toward the ideal. While its place in the curriculum is clear enough, Dewey's remarks about art in this relatively early text (*The School and Society*) are rather sketchy. The more nuanced accounts of art's connection with meaning

418. Mayhew and Edwards, *Dewey School*, p. 40; Dewey, *School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum*, p. 87.

that appear in later writings such as *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*, however, are remarkably consistent with these early intimations.⁴¹⁹

Our relation to the ideal or background is emotional; in the act of expression, which is brought to its highest pitch in art, emotion is embodied in an object, a set of materials which have become media. Art, then, helps us orient ourselves toward the background. For Dewey, this means not direct insight into the depths of the ideal, but a sensitivity to the traces of the ideal within the conscious foreground. “Indeed,” Dewey insists, “the use of such words as context and background, fringe, etc., suggests something too external” to describe art’s relation to this phase of experience. Rather, “the larger system of meaning suffuses, interpenetrates, colors what is now and here uppermost; it gives them sense, feeling, as distinct from signification.” In a stage play, for instance, the “emotional as well as intellectual meaning” of each moment of the action is colored by the “suffusive presence” of prior moments which cannot hold our direct attention without distracting us from “what is now said and done.” These prior moments, of which we must be aware in order to understand the play’s ongoing action, but which we cannot directly consider without losing the thread of the action, constitute a background, different in scale from the larger, all-pervading ideal background, but identical in its relation to our present awareness. The mass of meanings, of potential chains of connection (within the plot, and also to events outside the play and to the audience’s habits of mind) that is latent in Act I is partially realized in Act II, but in the process is reoriented and transformed. As we follow a well-wrought play, the mass of meanings accumulated since the curtain rose is “integrally carried in and by the incidents now happening,” and these incidents both carry forward the earlier meanings and give them “an unexpected turn” that changes their complexion. In general, “it is this double relationship” between background and foreground, “of continuation, promotion, carrying forward, and

419. Dewey, *School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum*, pp. 54-55.

of arrest, deviation, need of supplementation,” which defines, for Dewey, “that focalization of meanings which is consciousness, awareness, perception.” Good dramatists, in their effort to express a unified but dynamic emotion, construct sequences of present moments that preserve this double relationship to their own unfolding past. Thus, for Dewey, “every case of consciousness is dramatic; drama is an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness.” All arts, however, not just drama, fill this role. The “sense of the including whole implicit in ordinary experiences is rendered intense within the frame of a painting or poem” in analogous ways. Any good work of art kindles our emotions about the ideal, “elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact,” Dewey argues, “is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with esthetic intensity.”⁴²⁰

The miniature background of the prior events in the play, the enormous ideal background behind all consciousness, and, in general, the emotionally and intellectually organized past experiences that weigh on the present moment, are composed of what Dewey calls “funded meanings,” meanings which have become a part of our world-view and condition our perception. Consciousness, for Dewey, involves mediating between these funded meanings and the new meanings that we attach to things in connection with our present purposes. “While the roots of every experience are found in the interaction of a live creature with its environment,” that is, “that experience becomes conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter it that are derived from prior experiences”; otherwise we have only the moment-to-moment, unthinking adaptations of, say, a plant. Dewey's name for the process in which funded meanings are ripped out by their roots and rearranged into new meanings is “imagination,” which he describes as “the large and generous blending of [meanings] at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world.” Funded meanings are organized into bodies of

420. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 306; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 201.

knowledge (for intellectual meanings) and structures of feeling (for emotional meanings). Before they can be reorganized to reflect a fresh encounter with the world, they must pass through a state of transition in which old habits of mind are weakened and everything is up for grabs. “There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe,” Dewey writes; “and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination.” It is only the encompassing sense of the ideal, only our emotional awareness of the world as a single skein of consequential connections, that provides a safety net beneath the vaulting acrobatics of imagination. (Imagination “is a *way* of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole,” Dewey writes.) And it is only in the fine arts that we can avoid subordinating this awareness to some more immediately utilitarian purpose, without losing it in mere daydreaming.⁴²¹

The reorganization of meanings accomplished in the act of imagination will not endure unless it becomes part of a whole experience, a transaction between the self and its world in which both are changed. Imagination must be ratified by expression in an object (though we should remember that for Dewey, the vocal organs that produce speech and the limbs that produce dance are just as much objects as the ink on a page). Otherwise imagination does not lead to a new equilibrium with the world around us, and its role in the cycle of growth goes unfilled. In particular, if imagination is confined to reverie, or present only as a feeble aura around our utilitarian activities, the circulation of meanings in society is blocked. Of course, even in a virtuosic act of expression, there is no guarantee that the complex of meanings put into the object by the artist will be the same as the complex of meanings drawn from it by its audience. In fact, it is impossible for any two people to forge their sense of the ideal out of exactly the same components, since these are drawn from the infinite variety of everyday experience. Rather, the expressive object is an element of the built environment that was constructed for one act of imagination and is capacious enough to host others, but which imposes some constraints on those acts,

421. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 278.

like a zoo exhibit, designed for egrets, which might sustain an indefinite variety of birds, but not, say, hummingbirds. As Dewey explains it in *Art as Experience*, the relationship among artist, artwork, and audience involves several translations. The artist applies her stock of funded meanings to her materials, by placing the materials in new, suggestive contexts and arrangements. These materials have served as a medium for the artist, but they remain, in themselves, mere materials still. When the audience encounters the artwork, they see (if all goes according to plan) that its materials have served as media for the artist. They then try to make the materials into media for their own imaginative expression. If they succeed, they experience a meaning which bears some family resemblance to the artist's original meaning; no closer identification is possible. All sharing of meanings, however, involves this kind of mediation. Rather than finding art a flawed form of sharing meanings, Dewey sees it as the perfection of an inherently imperfect process. "Communication," he writes, "is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular" by giving a shared "body and definiteness" to "the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen," without making those experiences themselves completely shared. "The expressions that constitute art," he avers, "are communication in its pure and undefiled form."⁴²²

Since publics are formed on the basis of shared meanings, and especially since individual publics should be oriented toward an ideal public based on a sharing of ideal meanings, the arts are indispensable to a healthy polity. While "social inquiry" is essential in order to intellectually grasp the meanings of potentially harmful activities, the ideal meanings that art makes communicable are even more vital, since they can become the basis of cultural norms that canalize behavior along much subtler axes. "Artists have always been the real purveyors of news," as Dewey puts it, "for it is not the outward happening in itself which is news, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation" (Dewey 1927, p. 184). In addition to midwifing the "communicating community" in the present day,

422. Ibid., pp. 283, 253.

the arts also, by virtue of their embodiment in durable media such as stone, oil paint, and reproducible systems of writing and musical notation, create meanings that are shared across gulfs of time.

Artworks, he reminds us, are “the great force in effecting [the] consolidation” of “a multitude of passing incidents” into “the meanings that form minds” and cultures. As long as they remain, physically, “part of the environment,” their force continues to be felt, and they serve as “the axis of continuity in the life of civilization.”⁴²³

Freedom

The quality of freedom marks both the beginning and the end of the cycle of growth. The desire for freedom gives rise to interest, the first of our four qualities, and interest is finally satisfied only when freedom is attained. By freedom, Dewey means a quality of coherence or integrity among our many transactions with the environment. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Dewey sees human nature as a partially, but incompletely, describable menagerie of instincts, or “native impulses.” The native impulses, which animals as well as humans possess, are neither good nor bad. They furnish our embodied attractions and aversions, to heat and cold or hunger and food, and, in a certain dumb way, to less urgent concerns such as solitude and companionship. Even the passing of certain shapes and colors before our eyes strikes us as pleasant or unpleasant at this level of blind instinct. Dewey has no interest in enumerating all the native impulses, but he often impresses their variety on the reader. In *Art as Experience*, he lists some “events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man,” including “the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts”; he points to “the tense grace of the ball-player infect[ing] the onlooking crowd [...] the delight of the housewife

423. Ibid., p. 340.

in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.” These impulses spring from the depths of our animal heritage. They are artifacts of natural selection, although (since nature selects among random variations) there is nothing about them that is particularly significant, beyond the fact that they have proven, over the course of evolutionary history, to be compatible with survival.⁴²⁴

One of the basic facts of human life, for Dewey, is that our native impulses can come into conflict with each other, but that these conflicts can be resolved. Suppose, for example, that we are meeting our spouse for dinner, but we get hungry an hour before the appointed time. Now the impulse to eat conflicts with the impulses bound up with maintaining intimate human contacts. If we eat our dinner right away, we satisfy one impulse at the expense of another. This is what a wild animal would do. “To the [hungry] animal,” Dewey observes, “the activity wanted is simply that of eating the food, of realizing the momentary impulse.” We, however, can pause and use reflective thinking to find a way to satisfy both impulses (perhaps by having a snack now and dinner in an hour). So, “to man the activity [of eating] becomes enlarged to include the satisfaction of [our] whole life.” Because of the basic interdependence of human groups, this expansion comes to include not just “one life singly, but [...] the family, etc., connected with the single life. The material well-being of the family becomes one of the objects of desire into which the original impulse has grown. [. . .] By like growing consciousness of the meaning of the impulse, production and exchange of commodities are organized. The impulse for food is extended to include a whole range of commercial activities.”⁴²⁵

It is only when all of the impulses we feel separately are united (either by chance or via the intervention of purpose) that we are fully equilibrated with the environment, and within ourselves.

424. Ibid., p. 5.

425. Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, p. 22.

Ideally, then, “we come to have not a series of disconnected impulses, but one all-inclusive activity in which various subordinate activities (or conscious impulses) are included.” Hence “the real object” that we seek “is full activity itself,” the harmonious arrangement of desires such that the self has no unnecessary inner conflicts. Dewey calls this ideal “freedom.” “Freedom is what we want,” he writes, “and freedom means full unimpeded play of interests, that is, of conscious impulses.” In the most general terms, what all well-structured aims aim at is this reconstruction of the self towards internal coherence. Our interests in specific objects or activities are structured by this goal. When someone feels “consciousness of a repressed activity in view of the perception of possible larger action,” he “strives within itself to break his bonds and reach the new satisfaction.” It is “this striving within one's self” that generates emotion and interest in whatever will free our activity. Well-formed interests are thus inseparable from our drive for a coherent “character,” an integral personal identity. Ill-formed interests, springing from impulses in their immediacy rather than sharing a “temper and color” with “all other activities” of the self, leave “life [...] portioned out into strips and fractions.” The Deweyan subject, then, is a physical unity, a “live creature,” striving to become a unity of desires, a “character.” “The good man is 'organic,'" as Dewey puts it in his creaky quasi-idealist terminology of the early 1890s; “his character is compact, coherent; he has *integrity*.” By contrast “the bad man, having no controlling unity, has no consistent line of action; his motives of conduct contradict one another [. . .] He is not one person, but a group of conflicting wills. So far as he is really bad he becomes as many persons as he has desires.” Growth moves from the relatively bad, disintegrated self with divergent and relatively blind impulses towards the relatively good, integrated self with impulses that are made to converge by conscious effort.⁴²⁶

The harmonization of desires in the experience of the free individual both depends on and

426. Ibid., pp. 23-24, 28; Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 167; Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, p. 216.

reinforces a wider harmonization of desires at the social level. For Dewey, individuals cannot in principle have private interests that pit them against society as a whole. “Groups may be opposed to one another,” Dewey allows, “and individuals may be opposed to one another”; but, since one’s ability to formulate interests, purposes, and meanings all depend on one’s social environment, “an individual cannot be opposed to the association of which he is an integral part.” The illusion of absolutely private interests really arises, he insists, from the fact that a person “can be disassociated from this, that and the other grouping, since he need not be married, or be a churchmember or a voter, or belong to a club or scientific organization,” which suggests that there should be “a residual individual who is not a member of any association at all.” In fact, since relations never cease, all of the individual’s interests bleed out into one form of association or another. Her freedom is compromised, however, if the different associations in which she participates expect conflicting things of her which she cannot reconcile. She might, for instance, be “one thing as a church member and another thing as a member of the business community,” and experience inner conflict when the same situation calls out different reactions from these different parts of herself. The situation might even call up two different modes of perception, flickering back and forth between a Christian vision and a capitalist one. “A divided world, a world whose parts and aspects do not hang together, is at once a sign and a cause of a divided personality,” Dewey warns. “A fully integrated personality, on the other hand, exists only when [...] a world of related objects is constructed” as experience is enriched by a unified pattern of shared meanings. The road to freedom lies not in renouncing conflicting associations but in making intelligent adjustments to these groups that render them compatible.⁴²⁷

Dewey suggests two questions with which we can evaluate an association from the perspective of promoting freedom. The first is, “how numerous and varied are the interests which are [...] shared” within the group? If we could join an association in which all of our interests were integrated into

427. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 191; Dewey, *Experience and Education*, p. 44.

larger structures of shared meaning, we would be in complete equilibrium with the social environment. Our interests, however, involve us with all other people, not just a limited subset (if for no other reason than our shared participation in a global economy). So, unless our association includes the whole human race, we must ask Dewey's second question: "how full and free is the interplay [of our group] with other forms of association?" In a very bad form of association, such as a gang of criminals, "we find that the ties which consciously hold the members together are few in number, reducible almost to a common interest in plunder." An individual who spends most of her time in such a gang does not have a lot of opportunities to cultivate her capacity for, say, throwing dinner parties. Even if she does get all the cooking done, she will not have her choice of guests, since the gang's criminal activity is "of such a nature as to isolate the group from other groups with respect to give and take of the values of life." Dewey's example of a very good association, by contrast, is "the kind of family life which illustrates the standard." In a flourishing family, "we find that there are material, intellectual, aesthetic interests in which all participate [. . .] and that the family is not an isolated whole, but enters intimately into relationships with business groups, with schools, with all the agencies of culture, as well as with other similar groups, and that it plays a due part in the political organization and in return receives support from it. In short, there are many interests consciously communicated and shared; and there are varied and free points of contact with other modes of association."⁴²⁸

These standards of "endosmosis" of interests, meanings, and purposes among the groups in society and among the members of a group are simply scaled-up versions of the standard of interplay of interests within the individual which Dewey identifies with good character. Blockage of this interplay at one level inevitably ripples out into the others. A person with a compartmentalized or "disintegrated" personality will be relatively satisfied with narrow associations such as the robber band; the robber band, then, becomes lodged in the social environment and forces even a good association like the

428. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 63-65.

model family to mistrust its neighbors and close in on itself; finally, other people who are educated in this fractured environment will become relatively disintegrated, and the cycle of miseducation is complete. In light of these interrelationships, Dewey argues, against educators such as David Snedden, that “social efficiency” cannot mean the performance of some particular job, but rather “means neither more nor less than capacity to share in a give and take of experience,” to “ge[t] things into connection with one another, so that they work easily, flexibly, and fully.” “It covers all that makes one’s own experience more worth while to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experiences of others,” he goes on. While this notion of efficiency embraces all manner of practical wisdom, the “ability to produce and to enjoy art, capacity for recreation, the significant utilization of leisure” are especially “important elements in it,” since these allow for the communication of the ideal as well as the intellectual side of experience.⁴²⁹

The school has a special role to play in the promotion of social osmosis. It must introduce children to the vast body of socially accumulated meanings (scientific, cultural, industrial, etc.) “in a gradual and graded way,” breaking them up into manageable pieces that are congruent with their interests. Because this body of meanings is always, to some extent, “encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse,” it must strive “not to transmit and conserve the whole of [society’s] existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society”; that is, only what is educative. Aside from selecting among specific ideas and values to incorporate into the curriculum, the school needs to make itself “a purified medium of action,” a good environment free of whatever miseducative habits and arrangements prevail outside the school. As we have just seen, that means cultivating osmosis both within itself and between itself and other associations, acting as a kind of bridge between maladjusted groups. “It is the office of the school environment,” Dewey declares, “to

429. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 89; Dewey, *School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum*, p. 40.

balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment.”

On one level, this is simply the common school idea of youthful bonding among people of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. “The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment,” as Dewey puts it. On another level, though, it involves osmosis among groups which cut across these identity markers. “The school has the function also,” Dewey affirms, “of coordinating within the disposition of each individual the diverse influences of the various social environments into which he enters. One code prevails in the family; another, on the street; a third, in the workshop or store; a fourth, in the religious association. As a person passes from one of the environments to another, he is subjected to antagonistic pulls, and is in danger of being split into a being having different standards of judgment and emotion for different occasions. This danger imposes upon the school a steadying and integrating office.”⁴³⁰ A series of figures from Dewey's *The School and Society* illustrate confusion within the educational system, whose different parts have incompatible goals and methods (Figure 2); the proper relationship, as Dewey sees it, between the school and the family, the natural environment, the business world, and the university (Figure 3); and the inner organization of the school (conceptually, not architecturally) as it adjusts to these wider environments (Figure 4).

430. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 18-19.

Figure 2

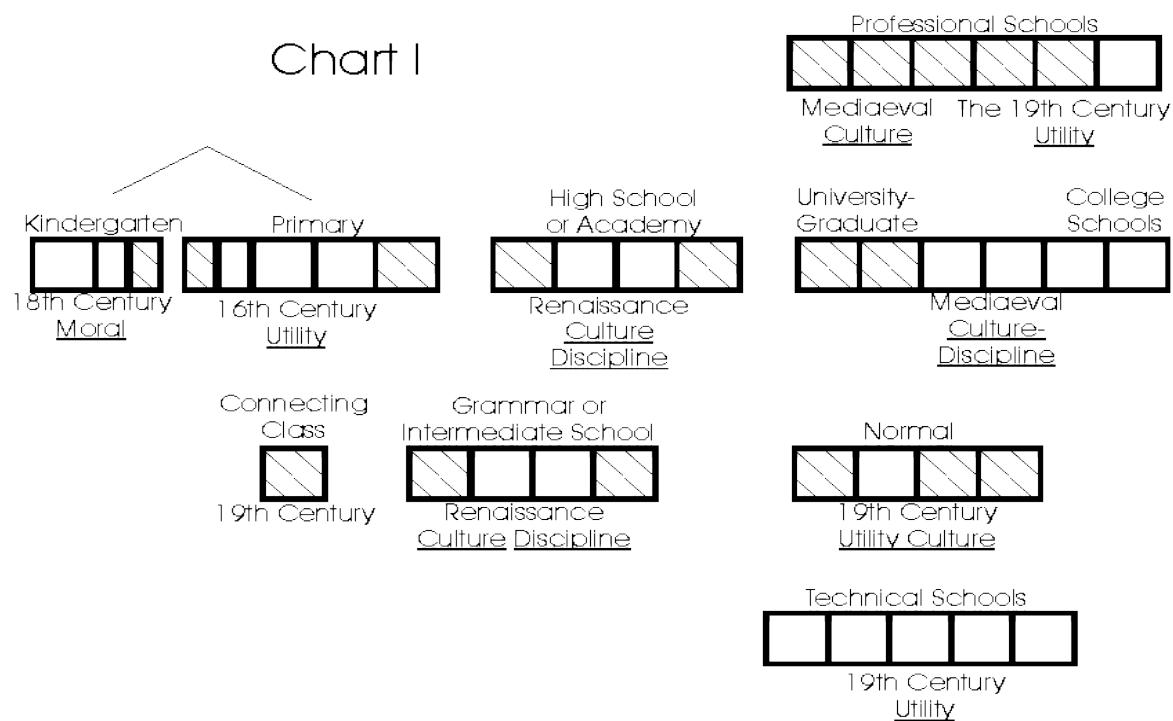


Figure 3

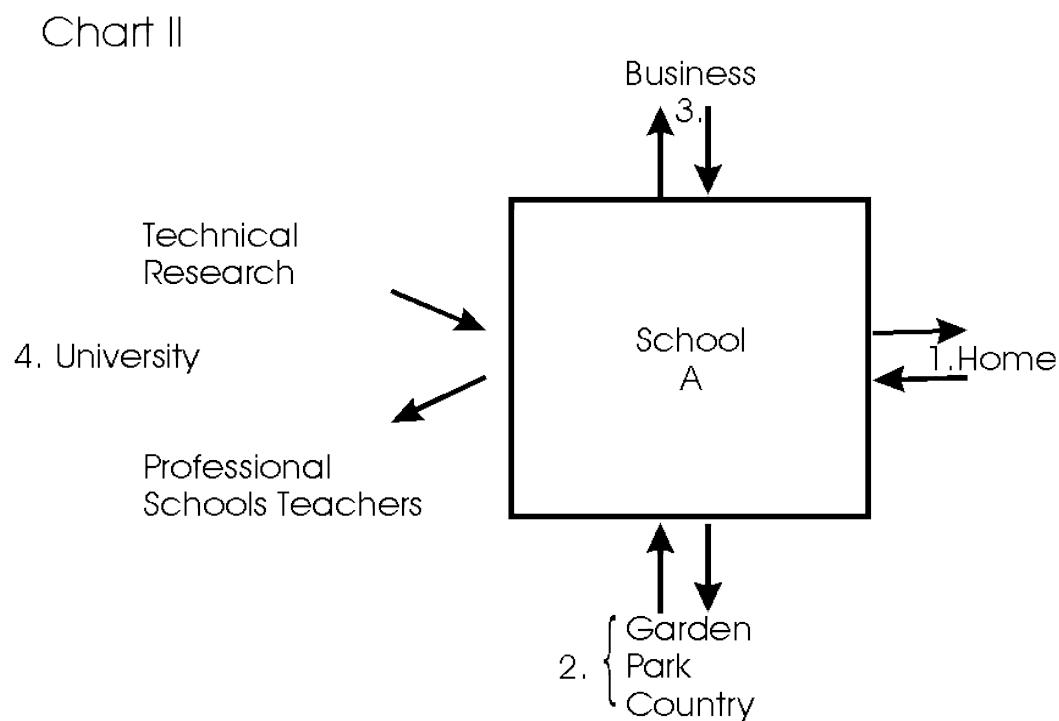
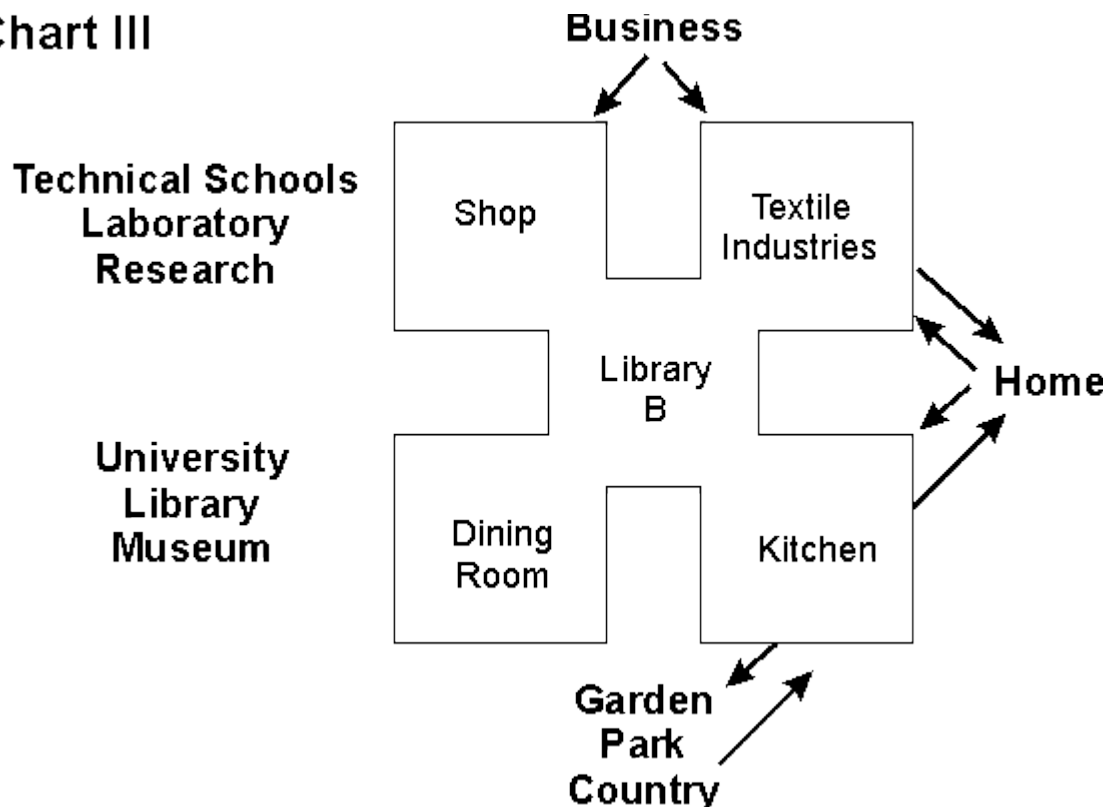


Figure 4

Chart III



According to Katherine Camp Mayhew, the “integrating office” was replicated at an even smaller scale within the Laboratory School itself by means of regular staff meetings (at which Dewey often presided) to coordinate among the various sub-environments within the school. As different teachers' classes moved in different, unpredictable directions (within the basic rubric of what Laurel Tanner calls the school's “occupational theme”), maintaining schoolwide equilibrium was an ongoing effort. “While constant conference was needed to achieve unity,” Mayhew reports, “the movement of the school as a whole secured correlation of the work in different branches more automatically than would be supposed by one who has not seen the principle of activity in operation. Any large discrepancies of aim and procedure soon revealed themselves in a sort of disintegration in the children's attitudes and thus led to revision.”⁴³¹

431. Mayhew and Edwards, *Dewey School*, p. 367.

Although a detailed consideration of Dewey's philosophy of science is beyond the scope of this chapter, we can at least briefly note that he sees science as a matter of adjusting one's ideas to best reflect the mutual bearings of material phenomena on one another – what nitrogen in the soil has to do with the height of cornstalks, say. Science should be taught, Dewey argues, by beginning with concretely experienced relations and working outward to more distant connections, formulating provisional scientific laws as one proceeds. Since our relation to the things in the world is always, at best, one of interest, in which our minds are modified by the interaction, this notion of science as grasping nature's omnidirectional interdependence can be seen as a buttress for the quality of freedom. “Since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity,” Dewey reasons, “it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another. The recent advances in physiology, biology, and the logic of the experimental sciences supply the specific intellectual instrumentalities demanded to work out and formulate such a theory. Their educational equivalent is the connection of the acquisition of knowledge in the schools with activities, or occupations, carried on in a medium of associated life.”⁴³²

Freedom does not mean transcending our desires, but, via the transactions of interest, harmonizing them with themselves and the environment, such that there is no perspective from which they can be felt as an imposition. When we go about this process in a piecemeal way, we have separate, plural interests, which Dewey calls “impulses.” In rarer moments, however, all of our impulses coalesce into a single line of activity; we readjust the whole self at once, and reorient ourselves to the world as a whole. Dewey (somewhat confusingly) calls this super-impulse an “impulsion.” “‘Impulsion’ designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary,” he

432. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 248.

writes. “It is the craving of the living creature for food as distinct from the reactions of tongue and lips that are involved in swallowing; the turning toward light of the body as a whole, like the heliotropism of plants, as distinct from the following of a particular light by the eyes.” This “movement of the organism in its entirety,” rather than in disjointed parts, must be “the initial stage of any complete experience” that is not destined to fray at the seams. The formation of an impulsion requires the self’s complete involvement in a transaction with the world, or the perfection of the quality of interest; it requires that all of the self’s activities be directed toward a single, dynamic end-in-view whose realization will involve growth, or the perfection of the quality of purpose; and it requires an ongoing imaginative reorganization of the self’s funded meanings in light of this end-in-view, or the perfection of the quality of meaning.⁴³³

Dewey compares the condition of impulsion to that of a wild animal, which is “fully present, all there, in all of its actions: in its wary glances, its sharp sniffings, its abrupt cocking of ears. All senses are equally on the *qui vive*,” and what the animal “retains from the past and what it expects from the future operate as directions [for its] present” purposes. The state of “animal grace,” however, can take only limited forms. It is relatively simple for a bird to draw upon all of its funded meanings (cats mean trouble, insects mean food) because these meanings are so few. While the bird may enjoy a kind of perfect equilibrium, and even grow into a finer and better-equilibrated specimen of its species, its memory and foresight work only on small scales, so it cannot adjust to a great deal of novelty. These capacities are greater in humans, and so we can adjust to more novelty, but we are therefore more subject to their miseducative forms: memory can lead to slavish repetition of past behaviors, while foresight can lead to an ends-justify-the-means mentality that closes our eyes to the particularities of the present. Rather than positing a tradeoff in which we are alienated from impulsion as the price for our ability to cope with novelty, however, Dewey argues that “art,” in which these miseducative

433. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 60.

tendencies are overcome, “is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously [...] the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature.” Thanks to the intervention of memory and foresight, we can realize impulsions with greater “power of selection,” and enjoy moments of grace far subtler, more varied, and more far-reaching, albeit rarer, than those of animals. In channeling our activities toward these moments, our most valuable resources are, immediately, a feel for the qualities of experience which are perfected in art, and, as a mediating step, “the *idea* of art as a conscious idea” (“the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity”), which we can use to seek these qualities in an organized way.⁴³⁴

When we fully realize impulsion, we find “a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being – one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence.” Once we have experienced the fulfillment of impulsion, then, “through the phases of perturbation and conflict” that are sure to follow, “there abides the deep-seated memory of an underlying harmony, the sense of which haunts life like the sense of being founded on a rock.” It is these moments that ratify our sense of the ideal, of an underlying sense in which the world hangs together, including ourselves as an element of that world. This sense of the ideal is both the goal of the adventure of imagination and its necessary condition. Every complete aesthetic experience enriches it, and as it is enriched, we become capable of even more complete aesthetic experiences in the future. Like education in general, aesthetic education – the development of expressive and appreciative power – is an endless circle or spiral.⁴³⁵

The aesthetic education of a culture is just as much a circle or spiral as that of an individual. The “underlying harmony” of individual experience that is both the ground and the effect of art is inextricably linked to an analogous harmony in social experience – that is, in culture. Like the purified

434. Ibid., p. 18; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 26.

435. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 16.

environment of the school, the purified experience of the aesthetic facilitates the interplay of experience at every scale, within the individual and among different individuals. We are now in a position to see that when the act of expression brings interests to their full realization, it does so by fusing them together into a larger whole in which they are transfigured. This fusion is both subjective, a reconstruction of funded meanings, and objective, a rearrangement of the objective world. It turns live creatures into integral characters, and dead materials into their media. In doing so, expression demonstrates that “there are no intrinsic psychological divisions between the intellectual and the sensory aspects; the emotional and ideational; the imaginative and the practical phases of human nature.” Dewey concedes that most of the time “the well-rounded man and woman are the exception,” and “individuals and even classes of individuals” develop lopsidedly, into those “who are dominantly executive or reflective; dreamers or 'idealists' and doers; sensualists and the humanely minded; egoists and unselfish; those who engage in routine bodily activity and those who specialize in intellectual inquiry.” But these asymmetries among the “elements of our being” and the members of our society can, like other forms of disequilibrium, become the occasions to “build a richer personality” and culture. “It is the office of art,” Dewey declares, to “compose” these “differences, to do away with isolations and conflicts” in our minds and in the cultural materials with which we are involved. At the same time, however, art depends on a certain degree of social and cultural integration. The more “attitudes that are taken for granted in the basis of civilization and that form the subsoil of conscious beliefs and efforts,” the thicker the nimbus of shared meanings surrounding specific words, ideas, and objects, the greater will be the “integration in the matter [...] of the arts.” Conversely, “such diffuseness and incoherence as exist in art today are the manifestation of the disruption of consensus.”⁴³⁶

As we know, shared meaning, for Dewey, is vitiated by hierarchy and drudgery, which replace the back-and-forth adjustment that characterizes freedom with partial and one-directional action. The world

436. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 16, 258, 354.

of industrial labor, where most of Dewey's contemporary Americans spent most of their days, fills workers' daily experience with miseducative isolations, as, say, their attention is limited to running a certain machine as fast as possible. "There is nothing in the nature of machine production *per se* that is an insuperable obstacle in the way of workers' consciousness of the meaning of what they do and enjoyment of the satisfactions of companionship and of useful work well done," Dewey insists. He is no William Morris. Rather, it is "oligarchical control from the outside of the processes and the products of work" that is "the chief force in preventing the worker from having that intimate interest in what he does and makes that is an essential prerequisite of esthetic satisfaction." Aside from the effects of such arrangements on workers' experience, they also make it harder to turn the materials with which they have to do into the media of ideal meanings. Many of Dewey's contemporaries believed that industrial capitalism was unbeautiful because it created urban poverty, with its inevitable shoddy housing. For Dewey, "it is not merely slums but the apartments of the well-to-do that are esthetically repellent," because "their character is determined by an economic system in which land is used—and kept out of use—for the sake of gain, because of profit derived from rental and sale. Until land is freed from this economic burden, beautiful buildings may occasionally be erected, but there is little hope for the rise of general architectural construction worthy of a noble civilization." As long as there is economic compulsion, we cannot fully express impulsion. But whatever degree of impulsion we can express reminds us what it should feel like to move through a world without compulsion.⁴³⁷

Dewey and *Bildung*

As we saw in the Introduction, the classic ideal of *Bildung*, as expressed by Goethe and Schiller, synthesizes three impulses characteristic of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century German thought: an

437. Ibid., p. 357.

Enlightenment desire for democracy and human rights (crystallized by Kant); an elitist suspicion of populist uprisings (crystallized by the spectacle of the Reign of Terror); and a nationalist longing to make states coterminous with regions of shared culture (crystallized by Fichte and Herder). Goethe and Schiller reconcile these apparently divergent preferences by invoking the aesthetic as a philosophical pressure-cooker in which all three can be held in equilibrium. The aesthetic, for Schiller, is defined by a harmonious relationship among the constituent elements (the form drive and the sense drive) of the universal human subject (the “idea of Man's humanity”), which can be achieved only within a political formation (the aesthetic state) defined by cultural homogeneity and the absence of conflict. The aesthetic state expands not by conquest but by aesthetic education, a realignment of others' inner compasses brought on by exposure to things (artworks, personalities, social worlds) whose beauty, grounded as it is in the conditions of human consciousness, is impossible to deny.⁴³⁸

As Marc Redfield and Joseph Slaughter have argued, Schiller's universal subject is constructed on falsely rationalistic principles that make it impossible to realize. In an education that aims to make one over in the image of that subject, then, one is doomed to be a perpetual pupil. The corresponding role of perpetual teacher, as Slaughter and Franco Moretti have observed, is performed by elite actors (the European aristocracy, the institutions of global economic development) who use their cultural-pedagogical authority to manufacture consent for their own exploitative practices. Redfield diagnoses the resulting politics as implicitly totalitarian, drawing a parallel between Schiller's vision, of a rational, enlightened state in which all human faculties are fully invested and in concert, and the Nazi program of “total mobilization.”⁴³⁹

438. Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Trans. Reginald Snell. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004.

439. Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987; Redfield, Marc. *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996 (the quotation is from p. 208); Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.

The classic ideal of *Bildung* is alien to pragmatism, and especially to the anti-foundationalism of post-deconstruction neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Richard Poirier. What could be more antithetical to the Rorty of *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* than the assumption of a universal reason, and the deduction therefrom of a universal subject expressing humanity's essence, a universal social and cultural form uniquely suitable for that subject, and a universal standard of aesthetic worth? Or more antithetical to the Poirier of *The Renewal of Literature* than the assumption that art communicates a single perspective from creator to audience, and that this perspective directly informs politics? In delivering us from these intellectual and aesthetic straitjackets, however, pragmatists like Rorty and Poirier are, perhaps, too quick to separate art from politics. As this chapter has attempted to show, Dewey, like Schiller, believes that free selves can be integrated into an intelligent society via shared aesthetic experiences which reflect the basic conditions of human experience. His grounds for this belief (as Dewey argues in his 1939 exchange with Stephen Pepper) are, despite their reliance on “the sense of life being founded on a rock,” thoroughly pragmatic.⁴⁴⁰

We can, that is, take Dewey seriously when he declares that “living has its own intrinsic quality, and the business of education is with that quality.” In Dewey's vision, as in Schiller's, the basic properties of experience drive the self toward an idealized state of total expression that involves remaking the world. For Dewey, one property of experience is uncertainty about its foundations. Another property, however, is that growth occurs, that it involves creating a shared world with others, and that its qualities of interest, purpose, meaning, and freedom are perceptible to us, even as they elude our full intellectual comprehension. We are not just in solidarity with others against our shared contingency; we also find ourselves united in the power and the need to grow together toward shared

440. Poirier, Richard. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. New York: Random House, 1987; Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989; Pepper, Stephen. “Some Questions on Dewey's Aesthetics.” *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Ed. P. Schilpp. Evanston: Northwestern University, 1989 (1939), pp. 369–390.

interests, purposes, and meanings, all of which are rejuvenated by a shared impulsion toward freedom. In this vision, we do not cultivate Rortian irony for the sake of an omnidirectional flexibility, nor do we, with Poirier's poets, "write off the self" solely as a form of self-justifying liberation from dead habits. We also write into something: a growing, enriching, freeing experience, which is perforce one more deeply involved with our natural and social world. When we reach a high pitch of self-expression we do not, as it sometimes seems in Rorty, simply announce the arrival of a new and different voice. We also reintroduce ourselves and our audience to the qualities of this enriching experience.

One might ask how the qualities of educative experience are any less problematic, as the focus of a program of aesthetic education, than Schiller's ideal of beauty. Has Dewey not just replaced the banished "idea of Man's humanity" with a parallel ideal of "maturer experience"? There are significant differences. Schiller's beauty, while only asymptotically approachable in human experience, is a relatively stable concept. Because he lives in a culture whose aesthetic education is incomplete, Schiller sees his own aesthetic education as incomplete; thus, he writes that he cannot imagine all of the features of the coming aesthetic state. The concrete meaning, the eventual cash value, of his ideal of beauty lies in a somewhat cloudy future. Nonetheless, it grows out of a fixed view of human nature, and it develops toward a vision of citizens who are, in all morally consequential things, identical, in which for each man "the State will be simply the interpreter of his fine instinct, the clearer expression of his inner legislation." So beauty always already means the quality that leads to this substantive identification; while we can discover its meaning in the future, we cannot change it.

For Dewey the meanings of the qualities of educative experience lie in the future in a different and stronger sense. Indeed, these qualities are, like anything of wide relevance, "things whose purport and nature is determinable only in an indeterminate future." Things get meanings as we grasp their bearing upon the future. The more their consequences ramify, the more they come to mean. The meaning of, say, the invention of the computer, is richer for us today than it was for the original inventors; we know

more about what differences it makes. The words by which we name the qualities of educative experience are similarly going to mean something different, and hopefully more, in the future than they do for us today. Unlike the future in which we find the meaning of Schiller's aesthetic state, this future is not just unpredictable in its details; it is truly open. No particular political, institutional, cultural, psychological, or aesthetic elements will finally exhaust the potential meanings of the distinction between educative and miseducative experience. It can always be enriched by further entanglement with the experience of others; others in their challenging diversity rather than, as with Schiller, their confirming identity.

Like other meanings, the meanings of the qualities of educative experience are shared among people without being the same for each person. In terms of an aesthetic education directed at these qualities, this claim brings us to the question of the universality of an artwork. The classic ideal of *Bildung* sees artworks as repositories of a value that is fixed by the fixed faculties with which people can react to it. When Schiller writes of aesthetic education “granting freedom by means of freedom,” he means that in the imaginative playground of art, we are liberated from adventitious obstacles that prevent us from realizing our fundamental shared identity, and hence from making the cultural and political changes that would make the condition of inner harmony permanent. The terms of Dewey's “freedom” are similar to Schiller's; both are identified with the harmonious interplay of all our capacities. Dewey's notion of the imaginative freedom of the fine arts, as a realm in which this freedom is our only concern, also resembles Schiller's. But the capacities which are liberated, for Dewey, are impossible to list exhaustively, and are defined relative to dynamic situations and felt needs, rather than as static elements of the mind. In their moments of liberation, these capacities, unlike Schiller's, also transform, and in doing so take some of the experiences of others into themselves. For Dewey, then, art does not recreate a single universality, but invites the viewer to experience certain ideal qualities on her own terms. “A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually,” he writes, “not just potentially, a

work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages. But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is aesthetically experienced.”⁴⁴¹

Thus the artist's idiosyncratic intention fails, just as much as any fixed notion of the fundamental identity of artist and audience, to impose any fixed meaning on aesthetic experience. All the artist can “really” say about her intention, for Dewey, is “I meant just *that* [i.e., the object itself], and *that* means whatever you or any one can honestly, that is in virtue of your own vital experience, get out of it.” “Any other idea,” he goes on, “makes the boasted 'universality' of the work of art a synonym for monotonous identity. The Parthenon, or whatever, is universal because it can continuously inspire new personal realizations in experience.” So, while “it is simply an impossibility that any one today should experience the Parthenon as a devout Athenian contemporary citizen experienced it,” and while “the enduring art-product [...] was called forth by something occasional, something having its own date and place,” “*what* was evoked” in the artwork itself “is a substance so formed that it can enter into the experiences of others and enable them to have [...] more fully rounded out experiences of their own.” The “universality” of an artwork's appeal is both polyvalent and dynamic; works that command widespread appreciation today are not guaranteed to do so in the future, and certainly not exactly the same kind of appreciation. While Dewey's vision of aesthetic education implicitly encourages the accretion of a shared canon (i.e., a shared world of meaningful objects), this canon should be subject to dynamic revision, and cannot be expected to produce uniform responses in the reading public, despite the fact that it can be expected to promote the qualities of educative experience.⁴⁴²

While the fine arts may be especially well suited to nurturing free and diverse experience within shared frameworks of meaning, they are not strictly separated from other areas of life. As in Schiller, in Dewey's vision one can imagine people and cultures, for instance, that promote the qualities of

441. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 113.

442. *Ibid.*

educative experience just as thoroughly. But these living exemplars, like the artworks whose condition they approximate, do not make themselves the targets of the aspirational identification that is so problematic in the classic ideal of *Bildung*. The student receives suggestions from the teacher only while they heighten her own immediate sense of the interest, purpose, meaning, and freedom of her own activities; she never accepts the teacher as a static model for emulation, and both parties can assume that their relationship can be altered at any time.

Dewey's version of *Bildung* makes the struggle for ever greater aesthetic experience an integral part of democratic community. It does not debunk the impulsion toward such a struggle, as Redfield, for instance, seems to do; nor does it make the struggle into the pleasant but politically irrelevant reward for the establishment of democracy, as Rorty seems to do. At a moment when the economics of higher education demand that scholars articulate the public value of the arts and their study, Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic education, while vulnerable to criticism from many angles, should be among our resources.

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